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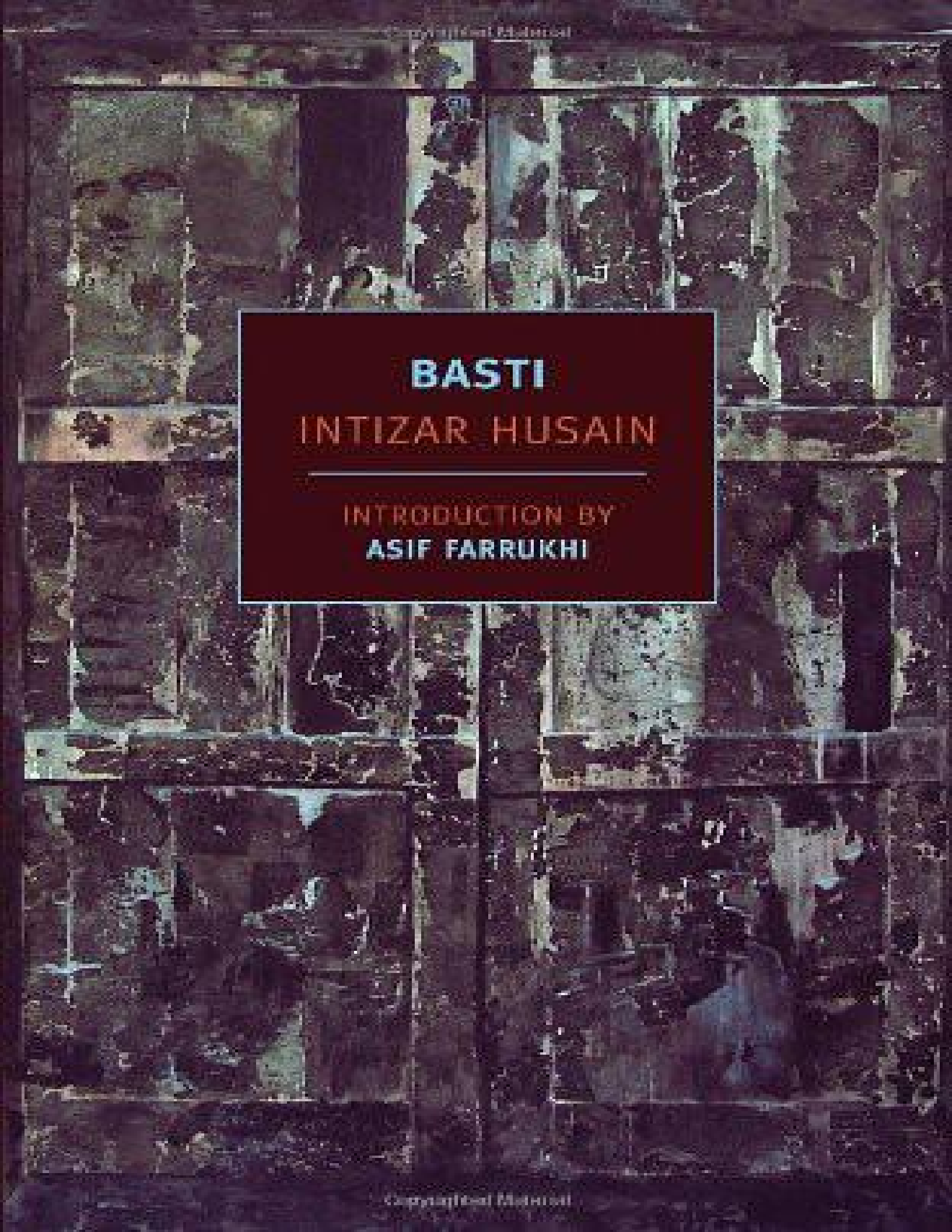

BASTI

INTIZAR HUSAIN

INTRODUCTION BY
ASIF FARRUKHI

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INTIZAR HUSAIN (b. 1925) is a journalist, short-story writer, and novelist, widely considered the most significant living fiction writer in Urdu. Born in Dibai, Bulandshahr, in British-administered India, he migrated to Pakistan in 1947 and currently lives in Lahore. Besides *Basti*, he is the author of two other novels, *Naya Gar* (The New House), which paints a picture of Pakistan during the ten-year dictatorship of the Islamic fundamentalist General Zia-ul-Haq, and *Agay Sumandar Hai* (Beyond Is the Sea), which juxtaposes the spiraling urban violence of contemporary Karachi with a vision of the lost Islamic realm of al-Andalus. Collections of Husain's celebrated short stories have appeared in English under the titles *Leaves*, *The Seventh Door*, *A Chronicle of the Peacocks*, and *An Unwritten Epic*.

FRANCES W. PRITCHETT has taught South Asian literature at Columbia University since 1982. Her books include *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics*, *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dastan of Amir Hamzah*, and (with Khaliq Ahmad Khaliq) *Urdu Meter: A Practical Handbook*.

ASIF FARRUKHI is a writer and a physician trained in public health. He is a frequent contributor to the English-language press of Pakistan and the author of seven short-story collections, two essay collections, and a monograph on Intizar Husain. He is the editor of *Fires in an Autumn Garden: Stories from Pakistan*, *Look at the City from Here: Writings About Karachi*, and co-editor of *Faultlines*, a selection of stories about the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war, and has collaborated with Intizar Husain on the anthology *Short Stories from Pakistan*.

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Translated from the Urdu by

FRANCES W. PRITCHETT

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INTRODUCTION

AT THE beginning of Intizar Husain's *Basti*—an Urdu word that refers to a human settlement of any dimension, from a few houses to a city—we see the world through the eyes of a child, and it is a paradise of brightly colored birds, playful animals, and luscious greenery. This paradise, however, proves to be short-lived. Soon Zakir, the protagonist and narrator of the book, is cast into a world of violence and uncertainty and regret and longing: the world of modern Pakistan. Images of burning houses and cities, of ash and smoke abound. Near the end of the book, this ongoing conflagration is glossed in words of the Buddha:

> Monks, just imagine a house which is burning on all four sides. Inside it some children are stumbling around, trembling with fear. Oh monks, men and women are children, stumbling around in a fiercely blazing house.

This is followed by a line from the Quran that tolls through the final pages of the novel: "I swear by Time, man is surely in loss."

To contemplate the character and dimensions of that loss and find a new form to contain it, one that strikingly combines the historical past and present-day events, mythic lore and modernist experimentation, elements of both the oral and the written, and various sacred and secular traditions of South Asia—this is the triumph of Husain's *Basti*.

One of the most celebrated writers in South Asia today, Husain is the author of numerous collections of short stories, three novels, and two memoirs, as well as a translator of writers from Chekhov to Stephen Crane and Thornton Wilder. Born in 1925 in Dibai, a small town near the north Indian city of Aligarh, he prefers to abide by his grandmother's custom of dating a life in relation to historical events, such as wars, plagues, and the rise and fall of nations and empires and their leading figures. By such a reckoning, Husain came of age as the British Raj was coming apart. His family belonged to the Urdu-speaking gentry, the *ashrafiya*, and his father, a convert to the Shiite creed, was a learned and religious man who was very much opposed to Western and modern ideas. Husain, his only son, was accordingly educated in a traditional madrassa as a child but later obtained

a master's degree in literature from Meerut College. By this time he had decided to become a writer.

He made a beginning as a poet and a critic, but then turned to fiction, writing his first stories in response to the terrible ordeal of the 1947 partition of India, in which millions of people were driven to leave their homes and up to a million died, and the new state of Pakistan, itself divided into noncontiguous western and eastern sectors, emerged. In response to a radio transmission from the noted critic Muhammad Hasan Askari, a mentor for the budding writer, Husain left his native town in India and moved to Lahore, the traditional center of Urdu cultural life, in West Pakistan. There he worked as a journalist, as he does to this day, immersing himself in the literary life of the city and rapidly making a name for himself as a writer of short stories (a first collection came out in 1952 and was followed by another in 1955). These stories, like those of Husain's great contemporary Qurratulain Hyder, focused for the most part on the search for roots after the disruption of partition, while also displaying a remarkable degree of formal invention. In the hands of Saadat Hasan Manto and others, the Urdu short story had already attained a high level of maturity and sophistication; Hyder and Husain extended this tradition.

Husain's first stories might be described as Chekhovian. Increasingly, however, he was drawn to the work of twentieth-century European masters like Kafka, even as he began to explore a wide variety of traditional South Asian narrative forms, some very ancient. These included the interlinked animal tales from the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*; the Jataka tales of the Buddha's endless cycle of births; and Persian *dastaans*, those epically vast sequences of loosely linked stories, full of chivalry, romance, magic, and trickery, recounting the exploits of legendary heroes like Amir Hamza. Equally at home in these European and Asian traditions, Husain came to read *The Metamorphosis* through the lens of a *dastaan* in which a prince is turned into a fly, and the *dastaan* in turn through Kafka. His new style—critics spoke of it as a turn toward symbolism—contributed to a larger shift in Urdu fiction, as the naturalism of an earlier generation of left-of-center progressive writers, with its emphasis on the squalid details of poverty and oppression, was replaced by a search for more imaginative and challenging approaches to the depiction of reality. Many writers believed that more than two-dimensional realism was needed to depict the vast social changes that had come with independence.

Husain's remarkable 1962 work, *Din aur Dastaan* (Daytime and *Dastaan*), marks a crucial turning point in his career. The book is in two distinct parts, each quite unlike the other apart from their common connection to the 1857 uprising against British rule. (The British have traditionally referred to this as the Great Mutiny because it began with a revolt of Muslim soldiers, but historians now commonly see it as a full-scale war of independence.) The first part of the book, "Daytime," is a novella in the vein of Turgenev, a writer whom Husain has translated: It is a study of unrequited love as well as a sympathetic and conventionally realistic portrayal of the north Indian "gentry" in decline during the years immediately before partition, and a brilliantly sustained evocation of a long-lost past full of decaying mansions, dark rooms, superstitions, beliefs, and rituals, that revolves around half-realized and unarticulated love, various journeys and farewells. The *dastaan* that follows, called "Roaring Water," is something else entirely. This may well be the only instance of a modern Urdu writer working in this fantastical genre, and it stands as a precedent for later works in a similar vein by Salman Rushdie and John Barth, among others. Here tale within tale unfolds, stories of adventure and romance that are all based on folk beliefs about 1857. Both "Roaring Water" and "Daytime" confront the political and social legacy of that war—which gave rise to questions of personal and collective identity that are still very much alive today—but they do so in ways that are not just unlike but irreconcilable. Husain, who has described himself as the last remaining soldier of 1857, thus implies that history alone cannot take the measure of this foundational conflict, the precursor to many later ones. It must be imagined and imagined again.

In 1971 Pakistan suffered a new crisis and a new division. Political tensions between the country's western and eastern sectors came to a head when a political party from the more populous but economically deprived east triumphed in national elections, a result that the military government, based in the west, then refused to recognize. The illegitimate and brutal military response of the Pakistan army led the east to declare independence, after which India intervened and war erupted on both eastern and western fronts. Pakistan suffered a humiliating defeat, and the former East Pakistan emerged as the current state of Bangladesh. Husain, like many intellectuals in West Pakistan, was not fully aware of the savage nature of the army's operations in the east, and initially he viewed these events as a crisis of the

nation-state. In 2005 I conducted an interview with him in which he remarked that "the immediate sociopolitical situation of the country" impelled him to write, continuing:

> All at once I felt that 1947 had again come alive within me. That whole period before and during 1947 came back to me so sharply and intensely that without thinking what I should do with it, without planning to make it into a novel . . . I just went on writing and writing. After that I put the pen down; after that the news began to come. East Pakistan had fallen. When . . . some months had passed, I again picked up the pen and looked at what I had written . . . [and] the form of the novel began to take shape in my mind and my imagination.

The novel was *Basti*, Husain's first, a work central to his oeuvre, in which the complications of historical perspective and the mixture of fabulous and realistic styles that he had tried out in *Din aur Dastaan* are fused into a new unity. Husain has always been inclined to see the present in the past and the past in the present, but nowhere else in his work is this tendency articulated as dramatically as in *Basti*. This fuels the sense of urgency and emergency that marks the book, the appalled prophetic fervor it takes on as its proceeds, but also its dreamy passages, those moments when time seems suspended.

The novel begins lyrically, describing a pre-partition world in which Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim traditions and visions both peacefully coexist and transform each other. We hear a child wondering innocently about first and last things, and the stories he is told by the Hindu priest and the Muslim mullah in response to his questions:

> "Maulana, when will Doomsday come?"
>
> "When the mosquito dies, and the cow is free of fear."
>
> "When will the mosquito die, and when will the cow be free of fear?"
>
> "When the sun rises in the west."
>
> "When will the sun rise in the west?"
>
> "When the hen crows, and the rooster is mute."
>
> "When will the hen crow, and when will the rooster be mute?"
>
> "When those who can speak fall silent, and shoelaces speak."

> “When will those who can speak fall silent, and when will shoelaces speak?”
>
> “When the rulers grow cruel, and the people lick the dust.”
>
> After one “when” a second “when,” after a second “when” a third “when.” A strange maze of “whens”! The “whens” that had passed away, the “whens” that were yet to come.

This questioning child is the hero of the book, Zakir (a common Islamic name meaning “he who remembers” and sometimes carrying an additional sense of “he who narrates or recites”), who lives in the fictional town of Rupnagar, literally “beautiful place.” The boy Zakir forms an attachment to his cousin Sabirah (meaning “patient” or “enduring”), the nature of which remains alluringly ambiguous. They play together as children, digging a hole in the ground which they then call their grave, though Sabirah is taken aback when Zakir suggests they follow up by playing wedding. After drifting apart, they meet again when Sabirah is a nubile young woman and Zakir a student in Meerut. Sabirah asks Zakir if he will check out a book from the library for her, and as they chat shyly he inquires if she has read the nineteenth-century historical romance *Paradise on Earth* (*Firdaus-e-Bareen*, which has also been translated as *Paradise of the Assassins*), an enormously popular tale about a youth so devoted to his beloved that in order to please her he joins the dreaded sect of the Assassins. Thus longing and foreboding and literature are linked in these tentative exchanges. They come to an end with come with partition, however, since Sabirah remains in India. Later in the book, Zakir will receive news of her from a Hindu friend, and his father will even urge him to write to her, a proposal that he mulls over. She remains for all that inaccessible, a memory that haunts the pages of the book.

The novel now jumps forward to the early seventies and the intensifying conflict between West and East Pakistan (while also counterpointing this with passages that evoke the euphoric sense of possibility that people felt in the first days of the newly founded Pakistan). Zakir lives with his parents in Lahore, where he teaches history. His mother is worried about family members in the east and asks worriedly about the news from Dhaka, news that either doesn’t come or is not to be relied on. Much of the book’s action takes place in tea shops (not unlike the Cairo coffeehouses, or *maqhas*, described by Naguib Mahfouz), where Zakir meets a group of friends who

argue and tease each other and try to make sense of the violence outside. The critic Muhammad Umar Memon has described Zakir's friends as "shorn of physical traits and particularizing details," and it is true they are a collective presence, a kind of chorus commenting on events, themselves "swathed in an eerie half-light," that they are hard put to understand and helpless to control. All they can do is talk, a reflection of the powerlessness of intellectuals but also of the people as a whole.

Things spin out of control, the news becomes even more intermittent and unreliable, and the sense of isolation at the center of the book grows ever greater. Passages from Zakir's diary (a private forum by definition) describe the slide into war, while interior monologue plays an increasing role in the book, and a note of delirious, perhaps prophetic, fervor enters in. As the gunfire and sloganeering continue, as everything is falling part, Zakir's father dies. Wandering aimlessly, Zakir finds himself in the cemetery:

> He sat down beside the grave, thinking that when he came to himself he would say the Fatihah. He was still unable to catch his breath, and his body was trembling. The sound of firing could be heard. The sound of slogans too, but they were hardly slogans any more. Now they were a torrent of ferocious, inhuman yelling. And why was there this smoke? . . . So much had already burned, so much was burning. So many buildings had already been destroyed, so many were about to collapse. He crawled and crawled, trying to come out from under the rubble. He felt that he was not all in one piece. Am I myself or the rubble of myself? "What a building has sorrow destroyed!" Am I in pieces? Everything around me is in pieces. Time too . . . . I'm wandering, broken up—through what times?

With his mind moving in anguish between present and past, Zakir tries to view the convulsions of modern Pakistan in light of the Shiite experience of defeat, persecution, and endurance, but it is only to envision the city around him as Kufa, the city which betrayed Imam Husain. (That nowadays Shiites are targeted for killing in Pakistan only adds to the ironies of this passage.) He keeps wandering through desolate lanes, offers prayers in a mosque devoid of other worshippers, and is warned: "Don't speak, for fear you might be recognized."

When a man can do nothing, what is his responsibility? Zakir and his friends wait in the café, defeated, it seems, before defeat. And yet defeat is not total, and introspection can perhaps lead to true self-reckoning and even hope. As Zakir explains:

> It's like this, Irfan: defeat too is a trust. But today in this country they're all putting the blame on each other, and they'll do it even more as time goes on. Everyone's trying, and will keep on trying, to prove that he's not responsible. I thought that someone ought to take up this trust.

Husain worked on *Basti* for a number of years, and the novel finally came out in 1979. Widely read and greatly admired in Pakistan, it also caused a good deal of controversy. In particular, critics attached to a politically activist concept of literature were disappointed at Zakir's ineffectuality, objecting that the book offered no clear political perspective or resolution, though that of course was the point. Husain is averse to making prophecies or giving marching orders or filling out prescriptions. Other critics of the book, as Husain's excellent translator Frances W. Pritchett has noted, complained that the novel offered "a 'negative impression' of their culture, a mood of 'nostalgia.'" But then as Pritchett sensibly remarks, "surely no intelligent reader will expect [the book] to be . . . a definitive, complete picture of modern Pakistan." Finally, the novel's unconventional form led some aesthetically conservative critics to wonder if it was a novel at all. The challenge of *Basti* to readers in Pakistan, and indeed everywhere, is to read it not as a handmaid to history or the valet of ideology, whether political or aesthetic, but precisely as a novel, one that mixes different narrative modes with extraordinary skill to describe a crisis that is as spiritual and universal as it is national. Mahfouz combined the influence of the European novel with that of indigenous traditions, like the Arabic *maqama*, creating what he called "a mold of his own," and Husain has done something similar. His vision of the novel is also close to that of Milan Kundera, for whom the novel "puts itself exclusively at the service of 'what only the novel can say.'"

Basti ends with a dramatic and ambiguous pronouncement. Afzal, one of the circle of friends, calls for everybody to be silent. Then he whispers, "signs always come at just these times . . . . This is the time for a sign."

What this sign may be, whether in fact it will appear—these questions are left hanging. The novel is open-ended. The reader is left in a state of suspense, suspense that reflects the dread felt in so many of its pages but that may also recall, however distantly and dimly, the experience of questioning, of wanting and waiting to find out about the world that is so beautifully evoked in its first luminous pages. In a sense *Basti* itself is the sign, or at least a sign of the possibility of a sign, just as Zakir is shown to keep faith in the possibility of revelation, a shimmering nearness that evades our grasp even as it hovers within reach.

—ASIF FARRUKHI

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ONE

WHEN THE world was still all new, when the sky was fresh and the earth not yet soiled, when trees breathed through the centuries and ages spoke in the voices of birds, how astonished he was, looking all around, that everything was so new, and yet looked so old. Bluejays, woodpeckers, peacocks, doves, squirrels, parakeets—it seemed that they were as young as he, yet they carried the secrets of the ages. The peacocks' calls seemed to come not from the forest of Rupnagar, but from Brindaban. When a little woodpecker paused in its flight to rest on a tall neem tree, it seemed that it had just delivered a letter to the Queen of Sheba's palace, and was on its way back toward Solomon's castle. When a squirrel, running along the rooftops, suddenly sat up on its tail and chittered at him, he stared at it and reflected with amazement that those black stripes on its back were the marks of Ramchandar-ji's fingers. And the elephant was a world of wonder. When he stood in the entry hall and saw an elephant approaching from the distance, it looked like a mountain moving. The long trunk, the huge ears waving like fans, the two white tusks sticking out and curving like scimitars—when he saw it all he ran inside, wonderstruck, and went straight to Bi Amma.

"Bi Amma, did elephants once fly?"

"What, have you gone crazy?"

"Bhagat-ji was saying."

"Well, that Bhagat-ji has rocks in his head! Imagine, such a huge heavy animal, how could it fly in the air?"

"Bi Amma, how were elephants born?"

"How else? Their mommies gave birth to them, and there they were."

"No, Bi Amma, elephants came out of eggs."

"What! Have you put your brain out to pasture?"

"Bhagat-ji was saying."

"That wretched Bhagat has lost his mind. Such a big animal, an elephant —as though it would come out of an egg! Not to speak of coming out—

how would it ever fit into an egg in the first place?”

But he had a lot of faith in Bhagat-ji’s knowledge. With his sacred thread around his neck, his caste-mark on his forehead, his whole head shaved except for one tuft, Bhagat-ji sat in his little shop, sold condiments, and told wise stories from the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*. The children called out, “Bhagat-ji, a penny’s worth of salt! Bhagat-ji, two pennies’ worth of brown sugar!”

“Children, don’t make a fuss! Be patient.” As he spoke, he weighed out the salt, packed up the brown sugar, and then picked up the story where he had left it. “Children, when Brahma-ji saw this, he said to Shesh, ‘Look, Shesh, the earth is very unsteady these days. You give it some help.’ Shesh answered, ‘Master, lift it up and put it on my hood, then it will stay still.’ Brahma-ji said, ‘Shesh, go inside the earth.’ Shesh saw a hole in the earth. He slipped into it. When he went inside the earth, he spread out his hood, and supported the earth on his hood. When the tortoise saw this, he felt worried, for under Shesh’s tail was nothing but water. He went down under Shesh’s tail and supported it. So, children, the earth rests on Shesh-ji’s hood. Shesh-ji rests on the tortoise’s back. When the tortoise moves, Shesh-ji quivers. When Shesh-ji quivers, the earth shakes, and an earthquake happens.”

But Abba Jan gave a completely different reason for earthquakes. Hakim Bande Ali and Musayyab Husain came every day and sat in the big room—the room with its fringed fan hanging down right in the middle, with its cornice running all around near the high ceiling where wild pigeons, doves, and wrens had built their nests. What difficult questions they used to ask Abba Jan! And without hesitation Abba Jan recited verses from the Quran and recounted sayings of the Prophet, and answered every single question.

“Maulana! How did God Most High make the earth?”

A little reflection, then the answer. “Jabir bin Abdullah Ansari asked, ‘May my mother and father be sacrificed for Your Lordship—From what substance did God the High and Exalted shape the earth?’ The Prophet of God replied, ‘From the expanding of the ocean.’ Then he asked, ‘How did He make the ocean expand?’ He replied, ‘From the waves.’ Then he asked, ‘Where did the waves come from?’ He replied, ‘From water.’ Then he asked, ‘Where did the water come from?’ He replied, ‘From a single pearl.’ Then he asked, ‘Where did the single pearl come from?’ He replied, ‘From

the darkness.’ Then Jabir bin Abdullah Ansari said, ‘You have spoken the truth, oh Prophet of God.’”

“Maulana, on what does the earth rest?”

Again a moment of reflection. Then with the same easy elegance, the answer. “The questioner asked, ‘May my mother and father, oh Your Lordship, be sacrificed for you—what holds the earth steady?’ He replied, ‘Mount Qaf.’ Then he asked, ‘What surrounds Mount Qaf?’ He replied, ‘The seven earths.’ Then he asked, ‘What surrounds the seven earths?’ He replied, ‘A serpent.’ Then he asked, ‘What surrounds the serpent?’ He replied, ‘A serpent.’ Then he asked, ‘What is under the earth?’ He replied, ‘A cow with four thousand horns, and the distance between one horn and another is five hundred years’ journey. The seven earths rest on two of her horns. A mosquito sits near the cow’s nostrils, and for fear of him she cannot move. All she can do is change horns, and it causes an earthquake.’ Then he asked, ‘What does she stand on?’ He replied, ‘On the back of a fish.’ Then the questioner was convinced, and he said, ‘You have spoken the truth, oh Prophet of God.’”

Abba Jan fell silent. Then he said, “Hakim Sahib! This whole world comes down to a mosquito sitting near a cow’s nostrils. If the mosquito goes away, where will the world be? So we exist at the mercy and good pleasure of a mosquito, but we don’t realize it, and we’re vainglorious.”

Every day these conversations, every day these stories, as though Bhagat-ji and Abba Jan together were explicating the universe for him. As he listened to the conversations, an image of the world took shape in his mind. Well, the world was born, but what happened after that? Mother Eve wept a great deal. From her tears were born henna and eye shadow. But from her stomach were born Cain and Abel, two sons, and one daughter, Iqlima, who was partly like the sun and partly like the moon. The father bestowed this daughter upon the younger son, Abel. At which the older son, Cain, waxed wroth, and lifted up a rock and smote Abel with it, so that he died. Then Cain arose and lifted up Abel’s corpse on his shoulder and walked all around the earth. And in the spots where Abel’s blood fell, lo, the earth became alkaline. Then Cain began to ponder what he should do with his brother’s corpse, for his shoulder had begun to ache with the burden of it. And it came to pass that he saw two crows fighting, and one of them slew the other. The slayer dug a hole in the earth with its beak, then buried the victim in it, and went and perched on a tree. Then Cain made lament, “Alas

for my wretchedness—I could not even do as much as a crow, and bury my brother!” Then the brother buried his brother, following the example of the crow. And that was the first grave that was made on the face of the earth, and that was the first human blood that was shed by human hands, and that was the first brother who was slain by the hand of his brother. He closed the book with its yellowing pages and put it back where he had found it in Abba Jan’s bookshelves; then he went to Bi Amma.

“Bi Amma! Abel was Cain’s brother?”

“Yes, dear son. Abel was Cain’s brother.”

“Then why did Cain murder Abel?”

“A curse on his blood—it was thinner than water!”

He heard this, and wondered, but now there was a little touch of fear mixed in with his wonder. In his encounters with wonder, the first ripple of fear. He rose and went into the big room, where Hakim Bande Ali and Musayyab Husain sat as usual, asking Abba Jan questions and listening to the answers. But Abba Jan had made a leap from the beginning of the world, and had already reached the end of the world.

“Maulana, when will Doomsday come?”

“When the mosquito dies, and the cow is free of fear.”

“When will the mosquito die, and when will the cow be free of fear?”

“When the sun rises in the west.”

“When will the sun rise in the west?”

“When the hen crows, and the rooster is mute.”

“When will the hen crow, and when will the rooster be mute?”

“When those who can speak fall silent, and shoelaces speak.”

“When will those who can speak fall silent, and when will shoelaces speak?”

“When the rulers grow cruel, and the people lick the dust.”

After one “when” a second “when,” after a second “when” a third “when.” A strange maze of “whens”! The “whens” that had passed away, the “whens” that were yet to come. What “whens” and “whens” Bhagat-ji recalled, what “whens” and “whens” were illumined in Abba Jan’s imagination! The world seemed to be an endless chain of “whens.” When and when and when—

•

But now the thread of imagination abruptly snapped. The sound of slogans being shouted outside suddenly penetrated the room and scattered his memories in all directions.

He rose and looked out the window. Glancing over the field opposite, which for some days had been serving as a rally-ground, he saw countless heads crowded close together. The rally was in full swing, and suddenly people had begun shouting slogans. Closing the window, he sat down again in the chair, and began to leaf through a book and read bits of it here and there. After all, he had to prepare his lecture for the morning. But even though the window was closed, the sound of slogans could still be heard. He looked at his watch: eleven o'clock. The rally has just begun, there's no telling when it'll be over. What if it should be the same bother as yesterday, and the night's sleep lost! Nowadays rallies are like that. They begin with shouts, and end with shots. But it was strange; he began to wonder at himself. The more the turmoil increases outside, the more I sink into myself. Memories of so many times come to me. Ancient and long-ago stories, lost and scattered thoughts. Memories one after another, entangled in each other, like a forest to walk through. My memories are my forest. So where does the forest begin? No, where do I begin? And again he was in the forest. As if he wanted to reach the edge of the forest; as if he was searching for his own beginning. As he moved along in the darkness and encountered a bright patch, he paused, but again moved on, for he wanted to arrive at the moment when his consciousness had first opened its eyes. But he couldn't grasp the moment. When he put his finger on a memory, dense crowds of other memories drifted along in its train. Then he moved on to explore what he remembered as the first event in Rupnagar.

•

But every action in that town seemed to be spread out over the centuries. The caravan of nights and days passed so slowly there, as though it weren't moving at all, but had halted. Whatever came to rest somewhere settled down and stayed there. When the electric poles arrived for the first time and were stacked here and there along the roads, what a revolutionary event that seemed to be! A thrill ran through all Rupnagar. People paused in their progress, and looked with wonder at the tall iron poles lying there.

"So is electricity coming to Rupnagar?"

“It sure is.”

“Swear on my life?”

“I swear on your life.”

Days passed, the curiosity diminished. Layers of dust settled on the poles. Gradually they grew as dusty as the heaps of stone chips which had been brought there in some prosperous time to repair the roads—but which had then been forgotten and had become a part of the dust-choked landscape of Rupnagar. Now the poles too were a part of the dust-choked landscape. It seemed that they had lain there forever, and would lie there forever. The affair of electricity was already a thing of the past. Every day when evening fell, the lamplighter appeared, ladder on his shoulder and oil-can in his hand, and went around lighting the various lanterns fixed to wooden posts or hanging from high walls. “Hey, you, Vasanti! It’s dusk, light the lamp!” With her tawny complexion, fresh young face, rumpled sari, forehead adorned with a dot, bare feet thup-thupping, she came to the doorway. She put a wick into the lamp in the wall-niche, lighted it, turned and promptly went back into the house, without looking toward him as he stood in his own doorway staring at her. In the Small Bazaar, Bhagat-ji put a drop of mustard-oil in the lamp on the dirty lamp-stand, lit it, and considered that his shop had been illuminated. By the gutter near Bhagat-ji’s shop, Mataru lit a torch and anchored it in the ground by his tray, and a few seconds later called out, “Ginger-chips!” But the brightest light was in Lala Hardayal the Goldsmith’s shop, where a lamp hung from the roof, its light reaching beyond the shop and making a spot of brightness in the street. In the town, this was the whole supply of light. And even this—for how long? One by one the shops closed. In the niches by the doors the flickering lamps grew dim and finally burned themselves out. Then only the lanterns fixed to wooden posts glimmered on a few street corners. All the rest was nothing but darkness. Still, in that darkness, wide-open eyes saw a great deal.

“Bi Amma! Last Thursday it happened, just at twilight. When I passed by the village hall, I thought I heard a woman sobbing. I looked this way, I looked that way, no one at all. Near the door of the hall, there was a black cat sitting. My heart almost stopped beating! I shooed the cat away. When I went on, *ai*, what did I see, but on the wall of the old lady’s house by the neem tree, the same cat! I shooed it away again. From the wall, it jumped down inside. When I went on and came out by the lane with the high well—

ai, Bi Amma, believe me, there was the same cat again! It was sitting on Lala Hardayal's terrace, sobbing the way a woman would sob. I was petrified!"

"God have mercy upon us," Bi Amma said apprehensively, and she fell silent.

But there was no mercy. Two or three days later, Sharifan came with more news: "*Ai*, Bi Amma! All over the neighborhood, so many rats are dying!"

"Truly?"

"Oh yes, when I passed by the rubbish pile, I saw them lying dead in heaps."

First the rats died, then people began to die. From outside came the chant of "*Ram nam satya hai*."

"Oh Sharifan, just look and see who's died."

"Bi Amma, Pyare Lal's son Jagdish has died."

"*Hai hai*! He was a strong healthy young man, how did he die?"

"Bi Amma, pustules came out on his body, and in a few hours he was dead, just like that."

"Pustules? You wretch, what are you saying?"

"Oh yes, Bi Amma! I'm telling the truth. The plague—"

"That's enough, keep your mouth shut! In a house full of people you shouldn't mention the name of that ruinous disease."

Pustules came out on Jagdish, then on Pandit Dayaram, then on Misra-ji. Then they kept coming out on other people. Funeral processions left from one house, then another house, then house after house. Bi Amma and Sharifan together kept count of them, up to ten. Then they lost count. In a single day, such a number of houses sent out funeral processions! As evening came near, the streets and lanes grew empty. No sounds of footsteps, no voices of laughing and talking people. Not to speak of all the rest, today even Chiranji and his harmonium had fallen silent—Chiranji who through winters, summers, rainy seasons, used to sit every night on the terrace with his harmonium and sing,

"Laila, Laila, I called out in the forest,
Laila lives in my heart."

When morning came, the feel of the town was utterly changed. Here and there a shop was open, all the rest were closed. Some houses had already been locked up, others were being locked up now. In front of one house a bullock-cart stood, in front of another a horse-cart. People were going, the town was emptying out. The town was emptied both ways: some people left the town, others left the world.

“Bi Amma, more Hindus are dying.”

“Bibi, when cholera comes the Muslims die, when plague comes the Hindus die.”

But then the plague ceased to distinguish between Hindus and Muslims. More funeral processions came out to the sound of the *kalimah* as well.

“Daughter-in-law! Keep Zakir inside, he’s constantly going out.”

“Bi Amma, the boy won’t obey me.”

“All right, if he goes out to look any more, I’ll break his legs!”

But no threat had any effect on him. The sound of “*Ram nam satya*” came—and he dashed out to the front door. Behind the funeral procession the grieving women passed by, carrying wood for the pyre and wailing aloud. After they had passed, how desolate the street seemed. Sharifan ran and seized him, and brought him inside.

A bullock-cart came rattling along, and halted before the door.

“Oh Sharifan, just look and see what guests have come in this disastrous time.”

Sharifan went and returned. “Bi Amma, they’ve sent a bullock-cart from Danpur, and sent word that it should bring everyone out.”

Bi Amma went straight to the big room, where Abba Jan sat apart from everyone, day after day, on his prayer-carpet.

“Nasir Ali, my son! Your uncle has sent a bullock-cart.”

Abba Jan reflected. Then he said, “Bi Amma, the glorious and exalted Prophet has said, ‘Those who run from death, run toward nothing else but death.’”

The bullock-cart had arrived empty; it went back empty. And Abba Jan dissolved saffron in a china cup, dipped a purified pen into it, and on heavy paper wrote in clear letters:

> I have five personages by whom the power of destructive diseases can be eliminated: they are Muhammad and Fatimah and Hasan and Husain and Ali, Ali, Ali.

He went to the front door and pasted this paper on it, then went back and sat down on his prayer-rug.

When Doctor Joshi came out of his clinic and went into somebody's house, it used to be an event. But now the Doctor Sahib, stethoscope around his neck, appeared in the neighborhood at all hours, sometimes in this street, sometimes in that. The Doctor Sahib was Rupnagar's Messiah. People said that even in the big hospitals of Delhi, no doctor could equal him. But now the Messiah's power was waning, the power of death was growing. The Doctor Sahib's wife herself broke out in pustules, and drew her last breath before the Doctor's very eyes.

"Even the Doctor's wife has died."

"Yes, she has."

The people sitting on Bhagat-ji's terrace could say no more than this. Faith in Chiranji Mal Vaid's knowledge and in Hakim Bande Ali's learning had departed long ago, at the first shock. Now Doctor Joshi's Messiah-hood too had lost its status. Now death was an inescapable reality. The dying died in silence. Those who arranged the funeral processions looked exhausted.

How tired he himself had grown! A funeral procession passed, and he just stood there, staring at the empty street. The street before his house looked so desolate. The shops and houses had mostly been locked up. Vasanti's house had a lock on it too. Here and there a shop opened its door a crack for a little while, then soon closed it again. He grew tired of looking at locked doors, closed shutters, and the empty street, and even before Sharifan insisted, he came back into the house, which itself was always sunk in silence. Abba Jan, distant from them all, detached from questions of life and death, sat on his prayer-rug, his fingers busy with his prayer-beads. Bi Amma sat on a cot, with her sewing. A word or two from Ammi, or Sharifan. Now shock had vanished from their eyes—shock, and fear as well. Other eyes too had lost both shock and fear. Everyone had accepted the plague as an established, eternal reality. Yes, but one morning Bi Amma awoke to find that her body was trembling. In this state she offered her prayers, and lay for a long time making her prostrations. When she lifted her head from her prostrations, her wrinkled face was wet with tears. Then she drew the end of her dupattah over her face, and very softly began to weep. Abba Jan, seated on his prayer-carpet, looked at her closely. "Bi Amma, what's the matter?"

“My son, the Imam’s coach has come.” She paused, then said, “Such a light, as though a gas-lantern had been lit. As though someone were saying, ‘Prepare the majlis.’”

Abba Jan reflected. Then he said, “Bi Amma! You’ve had a vision.”

Through Sharifan, the news of the vision spread from house to house. Ladies came from every house that had not been shut up. The majlis took place, and there was much weeping and lamentation.

“*Ai*, Bi Amma! Have you heard? The cursed ill-fated disease has been halted.”

“Oh, tell the truth!”

“Yes, Bi Amma! Doctor Joshi has said so.”

“Thanks be to God.” And again tears welled up in Bi Amma’s eyes. When she lifted her head from her prostrations, her wrinkled face was still wet with tears.

•

Just as the loaded, overflowing bullock-carts had gone away, so they came, loaded and overflowing, back again. Every little while a new horse-cart came creaking along, and another shut-up house was opened. The shut-up houses were opened; old ragged clothes and blankets were brought out of the houses, piled up in the street, and burned.

Now it was evening. Far off, from the courtyard of Vasanti’s house, the clattering of large and small pots and pans could be clearly heard. And along with the sound of the temple bells came a familiar voice: “You there, Vasanti! It’s dusk, light the lamp.” And Vasanti came to the door, barefooted, in just the same way, put a new wick into a new lamp, and lit it. She was about to go back inside, when he crossed the road and approached her: “Vasanti!”

Vasanti turned and saw him, and smiled.

“So you’re back?”

“Sure.”

He came nearer. He gently touched her bare arms, and said in a soft, tender voice, “Come on, let’s play.”

Vasanti hesitated. Then she suddenly flared up: “Go away, you Muslim brat!”—and ran off into the house.

Having been scolded by Vasanti, he went back to his house drunk with pleasure, and for a long time felt a melting sweetness, right down to his fingertips.

The uninhabited houses were inhabited again, and in the Small Bazaar there was the same hustle and bustle. Still, here and there he saw empty gaps, and here and there faces were missing. Pandit Hardayal was not to be seen on the terrace of his house, nor Misra-ji on the cushions in his shop. And where was Jagdish, who used to go every evening to Chiranji's terrace and practice the harmonium? For weeks the shaven head of Sohan, Pandit Hardayal's son, proclaimed that he was in mourning. But gradually hair grew out again on Sohan's head, and the gaps in the Small Bazaar began to be filled. Finally, there were as many people as though none were missing, and as much liveliness as though nothing had happened at all. Again a crowd began to gather on Chiranji's terrace. The harmonium played on and on until midnight, and the sound of singing could be heard far off:

"All night long Laila lies
Embracing a secret pain.
Is suffering too a beloved?
Everyone's absorbed in it!"

"Chiranji, you bastard, you're really the lucky one!"

"Why?"

"The pole's been put up right by your terrace. Now, you bastard, you'll be playing the harmonium by electric light!"

The poles, which had been lying covered with dust for ages, suddenly rose up. Walking along, people paused, lifted their eyes to the high poles, and imagined with astonishment the new light that would soon arrive.

"They say electric lights are very bright."

"You'd think the night had turned into day."

"Why man, those English are amazing!"

But the workers, having put up the poles, again vanished from sight. Days passed, months passed, then time just went on passing. The poles, laden with dust, again became part of the landscape. They didn't look as if they'd been put up, but as if they'd grown from the ground. In mid-flight, a dove or a woodpecker sometimes alighted for a moment on one of the poles —but, perhaps disgusted with its iron surface, the bird soon flew off. If a

kite came and perched on a pole, it would stay there for a long time. But the kites preferred to perch on rooftop ledges. Any kite that came and perched on the high ledge of the village hall stayed there for ages. It seemed that the world would pass away, but the bird would still be perched there. This ledge had grown old with the help of passing time—and with the further help of kite-droppings. But the crenellated walls of the Big Mansion were broken down before they grew old. This was the doing of the monkeys. Just as kites don't perch on every ledge, monkeys don't take a fancy to every rooftop. Some of the town's ledges had suited the kites, some of its rooftops had pleased the monkeys.

The monkeys had a strange way of life. When they came, they kept coming. When they went, they did it so completely that even on the tamarind trees near Karbala—not to speak of the rooftops—there wasn't a sign of them. The roofs were empty, the walls deserted. Only the ruined parapets of the highest stories served as a reminder that these roofs had once been within the monkeys' range. And what had happened that evening? Passing through a lane, it seemed to him that someone had jumped from one wall to the opposite one, over his head. When he looked up, what did he see but a troop of monkeys, traveling from wall to wall. "Oh, monkeys!" he exclaimed, and his heart only slowly recovered its beat. And the next morning when he woke up, there was commotion both inside and outside the house. Everything that had been left in the courtyard was either broken to pieces or missing entirely. One monkey had carried off Ammi's dupattah and was sitting on the rooftop parapet, holding the dupattah in his teeth and tearing it to shreds.

There was no telling what towns, what forests, the monkeys had come from. One troop, another troop, troop after troop. From one roof to a second, from the second roof to a third. Swiftly leaping down into a courtyard, snatching things up, here one minute and gone the next. Nanua the Oil-seller, collecting contributions from everyone, bought grain and a lump of raw brown sugar. He went down to the site of the weekly market; in the small reservoir there, which stayed dry year-round except for the rainy season, he spread out the grain, placed the lump of raw brown sugar in the midst of it, and put a number of small sticks nearby. The monkeys came leaping and skipping along and gobbled up the grain, filling their cheeks with it. They threw themselves on the lump of sugar. One lump, a hundred monkeys. The riot began. The sticks were ready at hand; the

moment they saw them, the monkeys equipped themselves with sticks. Whenever a monkey picked up the sugar-lump, a stick crashed down on his head.

The monkeys raised a commotion for days, for weeks. Night ambushes, looting and plundering, finally civil war among themselves; and after that—gone. The roofs were again silent, the parapets once again empty. But when the electricity came, the monkeys were in the town, they could be seen on roofs and parapets. The electric poles, enduring the harshness of the seasons, had become part of the scenery; now suddenly they again became a center of attention. Workers appeared, carrying long ladders on their shoulders. At the tops of the poles iron crossbars were attached, and on the crossbars white ceramic insulators were fixed. From the first pole to the second, from the second to the third, wires were strung, and from street to street the wires gradually connected all the poles.

Something new could be felt in the atmosphere, and the birds had acquired new places to perch. Rupnagar's birds were no longer confined to walls and tree branches. When the crows grew tired of sitting on the walls and cawing, they flew off and swung on one of the wires. Bluejays, shama birds, swifts would pause to rest in mid-flight by alighting on a wire.

Copying the birds, a monkey leaped from one wall of the Small Bazaar and swung on the wires. The next instant, he dropped with a thud and lay flat on the ground. From one side Bhagat-ji, from the other side Lala Mitthan Lal, left their shops and dashed over. With astonishment and terror, they stared at the dying monkey. They yelled, "Hey, somebody bring water!" Chandi dashed to the well, filled the bucket, brought the water, and poured the whole bucketful over the monkey, but the monkey's eyes had closed and its body had gone limp.

Monkeys poured in from all directions, and the nearby parapets were full of them: they were gazing at their companion's motionless body lying in the middle of the street, and they were making a commotion. Then people came running from the streets and neighborhoods, and stared at the dead monkey with amazement.

"Which wire was he swinging on?"

"That one." Chandi pointed to the highest wire.

"Then the electricity has come?"

"Yes, it's come. The moment anyone touches the wire, he's done for."

The next day a monkey again leaped onto the wires, and instantly dropped with a thud to the ground and lay still. Then Bhagat-ji and Lala Mitthan Lal again jumped up and went to see, and again Chandi ran with a bucketful of water, but the monkey had grown cold before their very eyes.

Again a turmoil arose among the monkeys. They came leaping and bounding from distant roofs. They stared wildly at the dead monkey lying in the middle of the road, and made as much noise as they possibly could.

The monkeys, tired and defeated, gradually fell silent. Many of them had begun to go back, when a strong, stout monkey came running from a distance to Pandit Hardayal's high roof. His face was red with anger, and the hairs of his coat stood up like arrows. He leaped onto the pole, and shook it with such force that it swayed like a half-uprooted tree. Then he climbed up and attacked the wires with his whole strength. The instant he landed on them, he collapsed. For a moment he hung suspended, then fell half-dead to the ground. Bhagat-ji, Lala Mitthan Lal, and Chandi, all three again did their duty. When the water fell on him the monkey opened his eyes, looked helplessly at his sympathizers, and closed his eyes for the last time.

Leaping from roof to roof, the monkeys came. It seemed that they would all come down into the street, but they only milled about on the parapets, shrieking and screaming. Then suddenly they fell silent, as though some terror had gripped them. Then the walls began emptying.

Evening was coming. The stout monkey still lay in the street. On the nearby parapets there was not a single monkey. Rupnagar, offering up its three monkeys as a sacrifice, had entered the age of electricity, and the monkeys vanished so completely that for weeks not one was to be seen on any wall, roof, or tree. In fact even the big pipal tree near the Black Temple, where every day, in every season, monkeys could be seen leaping and jumping from branch to branch, was silent.

•

Rupnagar's wild, uninhabited forest started from the Black Temple. On the walls and dome so much mold had grown, and then darkened with time, that the whole temple looked entirely black. Inside and outside all was empty, as though for centuries no conch shell had been blown and no priest had set foot here. The pipal was as tall as the temple, and monkeys were

always swinging on its branches. Except for the days when some tall black-faced langur with a rope-like tail appeared, and the moment they saw him all the monkeys vanished. Beyond the Black Temple was Karbala, which except for the Tenth Day lay desolate the whole year, as though it was the real Karbala itself. At a little distance from it was a mound, on which by way of a building only a small turret still stood, which was called the Fort. Beyond that the Ravan Wood was utterly deserted, with wide expanses of wasteland and a huge banyan tree standing in its midst. On summer afternoons he went wandering with Bundu and Habib, and they left the town and came out this way. When they went on beyond the Black Temple, it seemed to him that he had entered some new continent—some great forest where at any moment he might encounter any sort of being. His heart began to pound.

Passing by the pipal tree, which was loud with the merrymaking of the Black Temple monkeys, he paused: “Yar—” he could say nothing more.

“What is it?” Habib asked carelessly.

“A man,” he said with fear in his voice.

“A man! Where?” Habib and Bundu were both startled.

“That one.” He pointed at the Fort, where a solitary man could be seen walking.

In that uninhabited forest, a man! Why? How? Is it even a man at all, or —But their fear even of a man was boundless. They at once took to their heels.

Bundu lived in the house too, for he was Auntie Sharifan’s son. Zakir was friends with Habib. How he used to wander with them both, and play the vagabond! But after Sabirah came, his wanderings gradually changed.

Sabirah. Before, he had only heard her name when Khalah Jan’s letters came from Gwalior and said, “Tahirah and Sabirah are well. We all send cordial greetings.” Khalah Jan lived in Gwalior, since her husband, who was Bi Amma’s nephew, had a job there. But one day a telegram arrived: her husband had passed away. Ammi, in the midst of making bread, overturned the pan and stood up.* Bi Amma wept and wailed aloud.

Then only a few days later a horse-cart, loaded down with luggage and passengers, hung all around with sheets, came and stopped before the gate. Abba Jan, bringing a long, wide shawl, came outside. He gave Zakir one corner of it to hold, and held the other himself. In one direction he thus made a protective screen, and in the other direction no men were coming.

Then the horse-cart's curtain was lifted. Khalah Jan got down. With Khalah Jan two girls, one Tahirah and the other Sabirah, whom Khalah Jan called Sabbo. She seemed to be just about his own age.

At first Sabirah kept her distance from him. With a kind of shyness he stayed away from her, but stole glances at her from the corner of his eye. Then, hesitantly, he approached her. "Come on, Sabbo, let's play."

•

"Zakir, my son," Abba Jan said, as he entered, "It seems that again tonight these people won't let us sleep."

"Oh?" He crashed his way back from the forest.

"Son, are these people having a rally, or just being rowdy?"

"Abba Jan, this is how political movements are. People get enthusiastic, and then they get out of control."

"What did you say—movement? Is this a movement? Son, have I not seen movements? Has any of them ever been bigger than the Khilafat Movement? And Maulana Muhammad Ali—oh God, oh God! When he spoke, it seemed that sparks were raining down. But not a single word ever fell below the standard of cultured speech. Well, that was Maulana Muhammad Ali; but I never saw a single volunteer say anything below the standard of cultured speech, either. They said, 'Death to the English,' and not a word more." Abba Jan fell silent. Then, as though lost in memories, he began to mutter, "That venerable personage committed one fault: in the matter of shrines and tombs he supported Ibn Saud. May God the Most High forgive him this sin, and fill his grave with light. Afterwards he himself very much repented this support."

He smiled inwardly: Abba Jan is a good one! Even now he's still dreaming of the Khilafat Movement.

"And what are you doing?"

"I thought I'd prepare my lecture for the morning, but—"

"As though you could get any work done in this noise!" Abba Jan cut in.

"Yes, there's a lot of noise, but perhaps tonight the rally will be over quickly. Yesterday it dragged on because of the leaders from outside."

"Son, it doesn't look to me as though it'll be over quickly." He paused, then said, "In my time there were rallies, too. If there was noise, it was

before the rally. Then a speaker came on stage, and at once the people sat down respectfully. What a cultured time it was!”

Again he smiled: Abba Jan still hasn’t emerged from the time of the Khilafat Movement. But while he was forming the thought, it seemed that he too was following Abba Jan, moving into a past time. What a cultured time it was. If anyone spoke loudly, Abba Jan at once reprimanded him: “Child, I’m not deaf.” And when sometimes Tahirah spoke in a harsh voice, Bi Amma cut her off: “Girl, do you have a split bamboo for a throat?” And when Tahirah and her girlfriends, full of the joyful mood of the rainy season, swung high in the tall swings and laughed loudly, Bi Amma at once stopped them: “Daughter, what’s this noise, are the dishes breaking?” The rainy season, the swing, the songs, the ripe seeds of the neem tree—

“All right, I’m going. I’ll never get to sleep.” With these words, Abba Jan was going back. “And now you get some rest, too.”

Zakir let his words go in one ear and out the other. A distant voice was drawing him toward itself.

•

“Ripe neem seed, when will the rains come?
Long live my beloved brother, he’ll send a palanquin for me!”

What long long swings Tahirah was enjoying with her girlfriend, and how wistfully Sabirah was watching them! Just then Khalah Jan’s voice came from the kitchen, “Tahirah!”

“Yes, mother.”

“Daughter, how long are you going to swing? Come and do some frying. Make a few fritters.”

After Tahirah left, he went to Sabbo: “Sabbo, come on, let’s swing.”

When he sat pressed close to Sabirah in the swing, he felt that tenderness was melting and spreading inside him. He wanted to keep on swinging, but Sabirah’s moods never held steady for long. “I won’t swing with you.” She suddenly jumped down from the swing.

“Why?” He was dumbfounded.

“I just won’t, that’s all.”

He was left standing, surprised and unhappy. Then, very slowly, he approached her.

“Sabbo.”

“I’m not speaking to you.”

When he found Sabirah impossible to placate, he went sadly away. He happened to wander off toward the stairs. Climbing them, he reached the open roof. The roof was made of unfired clay; since the rainy season had ended long ago, the mud had hardened. From his pocket he pulled out the broken penknife-blade he always carried to sharpen his pencils. He began to slice the hardened mud with the tip of it as though he was cutting out sweets. In a little while Sabirah too wandered up there. With great attention she watched him cutting sweets. But now he was absorbed in his work. He paid no attention to Sabirah. When he had had his fill of cutting out the sweets, he invented a new occupation for himself. Where the mud had grown driest, he began to dig into it. When he had dug a small hole, he put one of his feet into it, and pressed all the loose dirt firmly back on top. Then he slowly pulled his foot out. A kind of dirt cave remained. Sabirah was watching with great attention. Then she said, “What is it?”

“A grave.” He answered casually, without looking toward Sabirah.

“It’s a grave?” Sabirah asked in surprise.

“Yes.”

She regarded the grave with wonder. Then she spoke with a kind of warmth in her tone. “Zakir, make me a grave too.”

“Make it yourself,” he answered shortly.

Sabirah, giving up on him, began to work on making her own grave. She scratched out a considerable amount of dirt. She put her bare foot into the scratched-out place. Then she pressed the loose dirt down on top of it. Then she slowly pulled out her foot. The moment her foot came away, the dirt roof fell in. At her failure, he burst out laughing. But Sabirah didn’t lose heart. She tried a second time, and again was unsuccessful. She tried again a third time, and this time she really drew her foot out so delicately that not even a grain of dirt fell. Sabirah gave herself airs at her success, and glanced at his grave, then looked at her own. “My grave is better.”

“Sure, it’s very fine.” He made a face at Sabirah.

“Put your foot in and see.”

He hesitated at this proposal. He thought a bit. Then, very slowly, he put his foot forward, and slid it into Sabirah’s grave. Then he was convinced in his heart that Sabbo was right. And for some time he kept his foot in that soft, warm grave.

After that, his vexation disappeared. His relations with Sabirah again became friendly. When Sabirah's grave collapsed as she was remaking it, he cleaned off her white foot with his hands. Then he pulled out a shell from his pocket.

"Sabbo, would you like a shell?"

"Yes I would." She looked covetously at the shell.

Taking the shell from him, Sabirah made an offering in return: "Come on, let's swing."

As they were coming down from the roof, they heard Tahirah and her friend singing:

"Mother, the fruits are soft, Mother, I won't eat them, Mother.
Mother, the water is high, Mother, I won't bathe, Mother.
Mother, the yellow-green dress is ready,
Mother, I won't wear it, Mother.
Mother, my husband has brought a palanquin, Mother, I won't go, Mother."

They turned back, and again went and sat on the roof. Now what to do? He proposed a new scheme: "Sabbo!"

"Yes?"

"Come on, let's play bridegroom and bride."

"Bridegroom and bride?" She was taken aback.

"Yes, as though I'm the bridegroom and you're the bride."

"Someone will see." She was nervous.

Just then thunder rumbled in the clouds, scaring them both, and at once the rain came down so hard that before they got from the open roof to the staircase they were both drenched.

•

How forcefully the rainy season began! Inside, outside, everywhere was commotion; but when it went on raining at a steady pace, the atmosphere slowly filled with a kind of sadness and voices were gradually silenced. When evening fell, the stray call of a peacock came from deep in the forest, and mingled more sadness with the sad, rainy evening. Then night came, and the rain-soaked darkness grew deep and dense. If anyone woke in the night, the rain was falling as though it had been raining for an endless

eternity, and would keep on raining for an endless eternity. But that night was so well-populated by voices.

“Look, Krishan hasn’t come, the clouds have closed in,
The night is dark and black, the rain rains so cruelly,
Sleep won’t come to my eyes, the clouds have closed in,
Cloud-dark Krishan hasn’t come, the clouds have closed in.”

“Oh, these Hindu women won’t let us get a wink of sleep tonight! And on top of it the rain keeps coming down.”

“Bi Amma, this is the Janamashtami rain!” Auntie Sharifan elaborated: “Krishan-ji’s diapers are being washed.”

“Well, by now Krishan-ji’s diapers have been washed quite enough! The water is overflowing.” Bi Amma turned over, and again tried to get to sleep. Just then in Vasanti’s verandah a drum struck up:

“Oh Ram, I went to the Yamuna to draw water,
On the way I met Nand Lal,
Ai, my sister-in-law wept—”

And from somewhere far away a voice was coming,

“The night is enjoyable, lover, will you go or will you stay?
The bed is springy, lover, will you go or will you stay?”

It was as if the whole season’s rain had made up its mind to fall during the night of Janamashtami. In the morning when he woke, no rain or clouds at all. Everything around was glowing, freshly washed. Sky, trees, electric poles, walls, roofs.

“Zakir! Come on, let’s go catch rain-bugs.”

When Bundu made this proposal, they at once set out from the house, and went in search of rain-bugs beyond the Black Temple to Karbala. How soft and bright the earth and sky were just then, and here and there in the grass so many rain-bugs, like soft bits of velvet, were crawling. What pleasure it was to touch them! In those days he wanted so much to touch soft things, but the moment they were touched, the rain-bugs pulled in their legs and stayed still, as though they were dead. Why do soft things shy away so much from being touched? He marveled at it.

“Sabbo! Look at this.”

“Oh my, so many rain-bugs!” She was full of amazement and delight. And then she treated him so warmly. In a single moment how close she used to come to him; in a single moment how far away she used to go.

“Sabbo! Come and play.”

“I won’t play.”

“I have cowrie-shells.”

“What do I care?”

“Look at this, it’s a whirligig.”

“Huh.” She turned her head away.

He went on twirling the whirligig all by himself, for a long time. Then he pulled out his yo-yo and began to play with it. How much he enjoyed spinning the yo-yo!

“They say it was Laila’s custom . . .”

In the midst of spinning the yo-yo, he paused with a start: “Majnun has come.” And forgetting the yo-yo, he ran off like an arrow toward the door. When he stood in the doorway, he saw that Sabirah was standing there too. “Zakir! It’s Majnun!”

“Who else? Of course it’s Majnun!”

With his collar ripped open, his hair tangled, a begging bowl in one hand, a brick in the other hand, chains on his feet that clinked as he walked—Majnun. He paused and stood still:

“They say it was Laila’s custom
To give alms to any beggar who came.
One day Majnun too went with a begging-bowl
And called out, ‘In God’s name, give me something.’
Laila came and gave them all something,
From Majnun’s hands she took his begging-bowl.”

As he finished singing, he took the brick and struck his forehead so hard that it was drenched with blood, and he fell to the ground with a thud and lay motionless.

“Zakir, is Majnun dead?” She was trembling violently.

“No, he’s not dead.”

“No, he’s dead.” She burst into tears.

“You silly girl, he’s just pretending.”

“No, Majnun’s dead.” She went on crying.

Majnun suddenly stood up. She was amazed. Taking up his begging-bowl, in which the bystanders had put some small coins, he walked away.

“Sabbo! Have you ever seen ‘Laila-Majnun’?”

“No, what’s it like?”

“Master Rupi plays Majnun and Ilahi Jan plays Laila.”

“Then what happens?”

“Then Master Rupi falls in love with Ilahi Jan.”

Looking at each other, they suddenly felt embarrassed. Sabirah at once frowned: “Go away, you shameless creature, or I’ll tell Bi Amma this minute!”

“What did I say wrong?” He was anxious.

But how could she have told such a thing to Bi Amma? She simply grew annoyed, and began to hold herself aloof from him. He himself felt awkward. He hesitated to meet her eyes.

“*Kau bas, kau bas*.” All of a sudden he pricked up his ears; voices coming from anywhere, near or far, used to have a strange effect on him. Whether he understood them or not, he was drawn to them. “*Kau bas*”—he had never understood what kind of words these were. He only knew that when Vasanti’s father, Lala Chunni Mal, stood on the roof and gave this call, crows came from all over and fluttered around his head. He ran like an arrow to the roof. Behind him was Sabirah.

Over on Vasanti’s roof two huge leaf-plates had been spread out. In them was rice that had been cooked in milk. The crows were making short work of the rice. Sometimes a kite came coasting down and pounced on a leaf-plate. Lala Chunni Mal was standing there calling out, “*Kau bas, kau bas*.” And a cloud of crows and kites had gathered around his head.

“Do you know what it is?” Seeing Sabirah’s amazement, he decided to enlighten her. “Ramchandar-ji’s leaf-plates are being cleaned.”

“Ramchandar-ji’s leaf-plates?” She was even more astonished.

“Of course, what else? When Ramchandar-ji had finished his dinner, then the King of the Crows used to come and eat the remaining food and clean the leaf-plates.”

“Oh go on, you liar!”

“I swear in God’s name!”

“Shall I ask Bi Amma?” And she at once went and told on Zakir to Bi Amma.

“Son!” Bi Amma glared at him. “Why were you born in our house? You should’ve been born in some Hindu’s house! Your father is always invoking the names of God and the Prophet—he doesn’t realize that his son has taken to Hindu stories!”

But Bi Amma no longer had her former energy. She supervised everybody just as before, she scolded everybody, but her voice was no longer so lively. She had withered like a raisin; it was as if she was slowly collapsing inwards. “Enough; before I turn into an invalid I pray that God will call me away.”

“*Ai*, Bi Amma, what are you saying! You’ll live to see your grandson’s wedding day.”

“*Ai* Auntie Sharifan! I’m so dried up and thin that my stomach is sticking to my back. What do you think—that I’ll live to carry God’s bags for him on Doomsday?”

Bi Amma had undoubtedly lived a long time. She always told how in her childhood only one torch, in the Small Bazaar, was lighted at night. Everywhere else, in the streets, in the lanes, was darkness. Before her very eyes the torch vanished, and lanterns appeared in the streets and lanes; and now in their places poles were standing, and here and there on the streets electric light could be seen.

Electricity had now begun to be installed in the mosque as well, but Abba Jan had thrown a spanner into the works. “This is ‘innovation.’” And equipping himself with a cudgel, he stood on guard in the doorway of the mosque. The electricians came, received a reprimand, and went away. Hakim Bande Ali and Musayyab Husain tried very hard to convince him, but he gave only one answer: “This is ‘innovation.’”

On the third day of his guard-duty, Bi Amma fell ill; her breathing became fast and shallow. Abba Jan, giving up the guard-duty, hurried home; but Bi Amma did not wait for his arrival.

The next day when Abba Jan went to the mosque for the dawn prayer, he saw that the electricity had already been installed. When he saw this he came right back, and for the first time in his life offered the dawn prayer at home. From then on he never entered the mosque, and never offered his prayers except at home. Though for many days he did go, morning and evening, to Bi Amma’s grave, and recited verses from the Quran there.

How hard Abba Jan tried to halt the spreading “innovations” in Rupnagar! During Muharram, when big drums began to sound, he seized them and ripped out the drumheads. “Playing drums is forbidden by the Shariat. I won’t permit them to be played in any majlis or procession!”

“But in Lucknow, they play drums in every procession!”

“Let them play. The Lucknow people have no power to change the Shariat!”

That year drums were in fact not played in any majlis or procession, but by the next year, Abba Jan’s power had been broken. Every procession was accompanied by drums except the one that left from the Khirkivala Imambarah, for that was Abba Jan’s family imambarah and he had power over it. And also because that procession, which was in honor of Hazrat Hur, was recognized as the quietest of Rupnagar’s Muharram processions. No small drums, no big drums, no singing of elegies—for Abba Jan declared elegy-singing too to be contrary to religious law. Abba Jan had taken a firm stand against elegy-singing, but the results were the same as in the case of his other firm stands.

Abba Jan’s grip on Rupnagar was loosening. Bi Amma had been called home by God, and electricity had come to the town. Abba Jan couldn’t prevent electricity from being installed in the mosque, just as he couldn’t prevent drums from finding a place in the Muharram processions. His firm stand against electricity was the last of his firm stands against the “innovations” of the time. After that, he retired to his room. He offered his prayers in his house, he passed the ten days of Muharram in his house. Then one day, sitting on his prayer-carpet, he inquired through *istikharah*,* and found favorable prospects for a journey. The indications were there; preparations for the journey began to be made.

“Ammi Jan, are we going?” Since Bi Amma’s passing, he now asked Ammi everything.

“Yes, son,” Ammi said sadly. She fell silent, then began to murmur to herself, “What’s left for us here any longer? The lands have already passed out of our hands. We still have a broken-down old house, but can we eat it when we’re hungry?”

“Ammi! Are we going to Vyaspur?”

“Yes, son, we’re going to Vyaspur. Your uncles and everyone, they’re all in Vyaspur. Bi Amma refused to budge, otherwise we’d already have left.”

“Ammi, is Vyaspur very far?”

“Yes, it’s far enough. From here we’ll go to Bulandshahr in a lorry. From there we’ll get on a train.”

A horse-cart was standing outside. In his imagination he saw a lorry and a train, those unknown vehicles in which he was to travel for the first time in his life. He was as happy as Ammi was sad. The desire to travel and see new towns had suddenly awakened in him. At some point Sabirah appeared and stood at a distance, watching the bedrolls being strapped up and the trunks being locked. She stood staring, then suddenly buried her head in Khalah Jan’s skirts and began to sob. Khalah Jan stroked her head and said, “What’s there to cry about? They’ll soon be coming back.” As she said this, tears came to her own eyes as well. Ammi, locking a trunk, said, “Sabirah!” She paused, then said, “Sweetheart, when I get there I’ll send for you soon. I’ll send for you and keep you there with me.” Abba Jan, strapping up a bedroll, cast a single glance at the weeping Sabirah, and then immersed himself in his work.

He stood watching. All his happiness had vanished. Gathering his courage, he slowly approached her. “Sabbo.”

Sabirah turned her wet face (from crying so hard her whole face was soaked in tears) and gave him one look, then instantly hid her face again in Khalah Jan’s skirts and began sobbing even more passionately than before —

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“Zakir, my son! What’s going on?” Abba Jan again came into his room.

“It’s nothing.” He spoke as though he’d been caught in a theft. And at once he opened a book and placed it before him, as if to suggest that he was really studying.

“Something’s happened. There’s so much noise, and I think I heard a gun fired. There was a kind of sound.”

Zakir rose and opened the window, and looked out at the rally-ground. Some people had stood up and were shouting slogans. Some young men who looked like volunteers were trying to make some of the standing people sit down, and to push some others out of the gathering. Among the crowd two groups had begun to form. Then there was a loud bang. He disgustedly closed the window; turning back, he informed Abba Jan, “It wasn’t shooting, they’re setting off firecrackers.”

“Why, what are they celebrating?”

“Just to create confusion in the rally.”

“What’s come over everybody?”

“Abba Jan, don’t worry. This is the usual thing in rallies nowadays. Go to sleep now.”

“Son, you know that when my sleep is once driven away, it hardly ever comes back again.” He fell silent, then muttered, “What’s come over everybody?” Muttering, he left the room.

Zakir rose and again opened the window slightly and took a look outside. The standing people had sat down, but there was still a great deal of noise. He closed the window, put out the light, and went and lay down on the bed.

“What’s come over everybody?” Abba Jan’s question echoed in his mind. In fact, what *had* come over people, he wondered earnestly. In houses, in offices, in restaurants, in streets and bazaars—everywhere the same situation. The discussion was first ideological, then personal, then insulting, then abusive, and then it came to blows. Passersby stood bewildered, stared at the combatants with fright, then asked each other, “What’s happening? What’s going to happen?” In everyone’s eyes a single terror, as if something was indeed about to happen. Then they went their several ways, and forgot that anything had happened at all. As though nothing had happened, as though nothing would happen. So much anxiety, and so much indifference! Suddenly some rumor would spread, the way a hurricane overpowers people. On people’s faces, waves of fear and panic. Again that anxious question, “What’s going to happen?” Then going their several ways, and forgetting. As though nothing had happened, as though nothing would happen. But is something indeed going to happen? What’s going to happen? When he could see nothing ahead of him, he set off backwards. Again the same long journey through the thicket of memories. When I was in Rupnagar—the remote, mythic era of my life. And when I came to Vyaspur —Vyaspur—

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“Is that a dead body burning?”

“Sure, this is a burning-ground. And listen, that dead body there, it’s alive!”

“Go on, you silly girl, you’re a liar!”

“I swear by Ram! It’s alive. It rose and stood up. Oh Ram! Oh Ma, I nearly died!”

“All right, and then?”

“Then it lay down, and I got up and ran off!”

“Liar.”

He wasn’t ready to have faith in any such thing that Phullo told him. He wasn’t at all a child any more! After Bi Amma’s passing, and the departure from Rupnagar, it was as though he had all at once grown up, as though his childhood had been left behind in Rupnagar. So many things had been left behind in Rupnagar! The dirt tracks that led who knew where, that only seemed to get lost in the trees. The swaying, jolting horse-carts, the drowsing, plodding bullock-carts, some of which were drawn by strong bullocks with jingling bells on their yokes, bells that filled the dust-covered road with a sweet sound. The Black Temple, the big monkey-filled pipal tree that stood in the Black Temple grounds, the desolate and sad wall of Karbala, the Fort on the hillock, the Ravan Wood, the mysterious banyan tree that stood in the midst of the Ravan Wood—a whole mythic era had stayed behind with Rupnagar. Here, although the burning-ground was nearby and dense pipal trees stood in the burning-ground, he never felt a mysterious atmosphere around any of the trees, even though Phullo had seen so much there.

“I tell you, a witch grabbed me!”

“Oh go on, don’t talk nonsense.”

“I swear by Ram! It was right at noon. That tree you can see over there—under it was a cup, in the cup a figure made of lime, and red vermilion powder, and a little sugar. And under the banyan, a *birbani* with fangs sticking out of her mouth snapped at me just the way a kite would snap!”

“Don’t babble, go and do your work.”

In Vyaspur he was seeing something quite different. Rubber-tired horse-carts ran along the smooth roads, with an occasional buggy, an occasional motor-car, among them. And beyond those roads, beyond the bazaars and neighborhoods, that dark, smooth, oiled-looking coal-tar road, on which the lorries ran all day. These vehicles made strange noises. Where were the sounds that had lived in the air of Rupnagar? Now his ear was becoming familiar with new sounds. The bells of the buggies and horse-carts, the horns of the lorries, the horns of the motorcars, and, strangest of all, the train whistle, which had brought him far away from Rupnagar and now was

taking him beyond Vyaspur. Toward unknown, unseen cities. When he heard the train whistle in the distance, he raced up to the roof of the house; from there the train tracks on the far side of the burning-ground were clearly visible. The train came along, blowing its whistle from afar and belching out smoke. First it ran along in the shade of the trees, so only its smoke could be seen in the air, then suddenly from the shelter of the trees the coal-black rushing engine came into view, spitting into the face of the sky clouds of smoke even blacker than itself, and behind it countless cars full of travelers. How swiftly these cars went on passing—in the space of a breath they were lost to sight. He was amazed. Then when he remembered Abba Jan's telling him that this train was coming from Moradabad, and from Vyaspur was going on to Delhi, he was even more amazed.

Since coming here he had stayed in Khan Bahadur Uncle's house, which was somewhat outside the city, set among fields and gardens, so that if you stood on its roof then right in front of you was the burning-ground, beyond the burning-ground the railroad tracks, beyond the railroad tracks rows of trees on the horizon. Then when he went to the bazaar, he marveled at every shop. Compared to Rupnagar's Small Bazaar, how big the Khirki Bazaar was! In one shop, nothing but bicycles and more bicycles. How could he ever before have seen so many bicycles! Beyond the shops for bicycles, shoes, and cloth was that huge market with tall heaps of wheat and cotton here and there, and near them a whole procession of wild pigeons. There were shops with no merchandise in them, only a clean white sheet spread on the floor, on the sheet a long bolster, and seated against the bolster a trader, with a telephone before him. Suddenly there would be a commotion, and every trader, every dealer would swiftly rotate the crank and then talk very loudly into the phone. He was astonished. Gradually he learned that the commotion happened when the price of some commodity changed.

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So much noise in the bazaar, and all around the house so much silence. Only when the train came was the silence broken. After the train passed, silence again, and the railroad tracks stretching far away—which he, standing on the roof, stared at with wonder for a long time. His wonders too had traveled a long way, and had changed so much.

Khan Bahadur Uncle had built this house with the thought of retiring to live here on his pension. After spending his life in Raisina, he couldn't tolerate the lanes of Vyaspur city itself. But even before it was time for his pension, he departed this world. This event had taken place long before Zakir came to Vyaspur. He had never seen Khan Bahadur Uncle, but after coming to Vyaspur he had seen the shadow of his greatness hovering over the whole family.

"Then my brother the late Khan Bahadur devised a trick: he became a rebel, and mingled with the rebels. He became such an excellent rebel that he was made chairman of his committee. But the rebels too had secret agents. One agent found him out. In the presence of the whole committee, he let the cat out of the bag: 'This man is an informer for the English!' Then at once the rebels whipped out pistols and aimed them at my brother." Chacha Jan, in the midst of speaking, paused. Ache Bhai, Najib Bhai, Sahib Miyan, all were listening very intently.

"Then what happened?"

"Oh, my late brother was never a man to lose his head in a tight spot! He made such a speech that the rebels' pistols turned toward the very rebel who had declared him an English agent." Chacha Jan paused, then spoke again. "These rebels were so dangerous that if my brother the late Khan Bahadur hadn't captured them, they would have brought the English to the same pass they were in during '57! They were terrorists. They created turmoil all over India."

In the family when a wedding took place and all the family members got together, Chacha Jan started telling stories like this about Khan Bahadur Uncle, and sons and nephews gathered round and listened as though they were hearing legends about some mythic hero.

"My brother the late Khan Bahadur had a silver leg."

"A silver leg?" Najib Bhai asked in astonishment.

"Yes indeed! It happened like this: while he was pursuing Sultanah the Brigand, he leaped from a moving train. He broke the bone in his leg. Then in Raisina the Viceroy's surgeon treated him, and removed his whole leg and attached a silver leg."

They were all absorbed in wonder. Then Najib Bhai asked, "Then it was Uncle who captured Sultanah the Brigand?"

"Who else? Young Sahib, or even Young Sahib's venerable father, could never have managed to catch him. Only my brother the Khan Bahadur had

the courage to capture him! And who captured the Silk Handkerchief band?”

“The Silk Handkerchief band? Who were they?”

“Who were the Silk Handkerchief band?” Chacha Jan laughed: “My sons, what do you know about anything? The Silk Handkerchief band had made a complete plan for overthrowing English rule. In the nick of time my brother the late Khan Bahadur figured out their scheme, and snatched the silk handkerchief with their plans written on it.” He paused, then said, “My brother the late Khan Bahadur did great favors for the English. That’s why when he died, the Viceroy said, ‘Khan Bahadur’s death has broken my back.’”

“Brother, ask this nephew of yours whether he too plans to make something of himself like Uncle, or whether he’ll live an idle life.”

“Zakir, my son! You hear what your mother is asking—give her an answer. One thing I’ll tell you for sure: my brother the Khan Bahadur didn’t become the Khan Bahadur easily. How hard he worked! Can anyone today study as painstakingly as he studied? I’ll tell you what happened one time, his lantern ran out of oil. When he looked in the oil bottle, that was empty too. Do you know what he did? He caught fireflies and tied them in the end of Bi Amma’s dupattah, and by their light he studied until it was time for the morning prayer. Will anyone today believe this? But then, he received the fruit of his labor. When the results of the Matriculation exam were announced, he came in first for the whole of the United Provinces.”

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He too was studying hard. The Matriculation exam was upon him. Night after night he sat up studying with a lantern lit, and day after day he settled himself under a mango tree in the school grounds. The school was closed to prepare for the exam. The classrooms were locked up, the verandahs empty, the playing fields silent. What a favorable atmosphere it was for studying! In the shade of the school’s single mango tree, he and Surendar both studied with concentration. When they grew tired, they would stare at the coal-tar road before them: sometimes a lorry passed by, and then again the road would be empty.

“Do you know where this lorry is going?” Surendar asked him.

“Where is it going?”

“Meerut.”

“Meerut? This lorry is going to Meerut? Have you seen Meerut? What is Meerut like?” In a single breath he asked so many questions.

He saw Meerut first through Surendar’s eyes. Now he was seeing it through his own. After their classes at the College were over, he and Surendar both used to set off toward the Company Gardens. The Cantonment, the world of the English, long silent oiled-looking streets between two rows of dense trees, going on and on until they were lost in the distance. Sometimes a white Englishman in white canvas shoes and white shirt and shorts, carrying a tennis racket, would hurry past them, quite close, and turn in at the Company Gardens gate. Sometimes a golden-haired, white-faced Memsahib passed by them, and they both watched her naked white calves until she vanished from sight. Then a dark-skinned maidservant would come by, with a child the color of milk seated in a carriage that she slowly pushed along.

“From here”—Surendar stopped during their walk—“the movement of ’57 started.”

“From here?” He looked at the place with amazement, and wondered what was special about it. As he kept on looking at it, and thinking about it, the awesomeness of the place gradually made itself felt.

“Surendar!” As they walked on, he suddenly asked, “How will Hitler get to London? There’s an ocean in between.”

“My friend, Hitler has a powder that you sprinkle on the ocean, and then it settles down and becomes like stone.”

Then back to the College where there was a crowd, there was turmoil, if Surendar hadn’t been there he would have been lost in the crush of boys. But then the whole crowd of boys was lost, along with Surendar. Passing along the verandah, one boy shouted a slogan: “Quit India!” The boys going to classes, the boys coming from classes, paused. Then in an instant a storm of slogans arose: “Quit India!” “Long live the revolution!” “Victory to Mahatma Gandhi!” Then the classroom windows began to break. Then someone shouted, “They’re coming!” Pell-mell flight, the emptying verandah, silence, in the silence the distant sound of galloping horses. The mounted police were coming to the College.

The verandahs, the rooms, the lawns stayed silent for weeks, for months. Here and there guards with truncheons, sometimes dozing, sometimes standing alertly at attention. A handful of Muslim boys, five or six in one

class and two or three in another. But Professor Mukherji still gave his lectures just as loudly, and with just as much enthusiasm, as if nothing had happened.

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As the exams drew near, the boys came back, but the liveliness and activity didn't. Then the vacation came. Back in Vyaspur again. How the weather changed! It gradually changed so much that hot western winds began to blow. By noon the doors of the houses were closed, the woven grass screens shielding the verandahs were drenched again and again with water. But the small lanes never saw the sun. In those lanes were so many houses that had no need for woven grass screens. In the doorways women could be seen, spinning and talking.

"Did you see?" Surendar asked, emerging in a great hurry from Pattharvali Lane.

"No, yar, I didn't see anybody."

"She was standing on the balcony, didn't you see?"

"No, who was standing?"

"Rimjhim, who else?"

"Rimjhim?"

"Yes, I call her Rimjhim. Wait till you see her, you bastard, you'll die!"

They took one turn along the lane, then another turn, then a third turn, but she wasn't to be seen. "She's disappeared."

Surendar had not given up hope. Seeing a monkey-man, he suddenly grinned. "Listen, yar, we'll go along with him."

The monkey-man, in the full heat of the afternoon, went playing his hourglass-shaped drum from one lane to a second, from the second lane to a third. Finally in Pattharvali Lane he began his show. When the female monkey didn't behave, the male monkey beat her with a stick, until she grew angry and went home to her mother's house.

Surendar's gaze was fixed on the balcony. He believed she'd surely come to see the monkeys perform.

"Come on, you bastard, look!"

"Where?"

"On the balcony, she's standing there."

He looked. A darkish complexion, a very slender, very soft body.

“Well if it isn’t a little Muslim brat!” She instantly drew back into the room, and vanished.

She didn’t appear again. So what. Surendar had taught him how to look at a girl.

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Then he went off to Rupnagar. He had to go to Rupnagar too during that vacation, to see Khalah Jan. After so many years he saw Rupnagar again. The potholed road still layered with dust, with heaps of stone-chips still lying here and there on either side, horse-carts still bouncing up and down, ox-carts still crawling along the unpaved tracks. All this was just the same. With a contented wonder he looked at it all. But not everything was just the same. All his playmates had grown so tall. Their complexions had darkened and ripened, their voices had deepened. Habib had passed the Matriculation exam and gone off to Aligarh, and now had come back for the vacation, looking quite fashionable. His trousers were of a new cut. While once his head used to be shaved, then rubbed with a mango-stone,* now he had long English-style hair. Auntie Sharifan had sent Bundu too to Aligarh, to learn locksmithing.

And Sabirah! How tall Sabirah had grown, and how her bosom had swelled out, so that she always kept it covered with her dupattah. Nevertheless, two round swellings made themselves apparent. Now she didn’t even meet his eyes, as though he was a stranger.

He wandered through lane after lane, bazaar after bazaar. He was like a thirsty man whose thirst was being assuaged, after so long, by these familiar sights. How impatiently he looked at things, impatiently and desirously—as though he wanted to suck everything in through his eyes. Things were sometimes the same as before, sometimes changed. How numerous the electric poles had become. Except for the Small Bazaar, their wires now spread everywhere. The monkeys, avoiding the wires, were leaping from roof to roof. Rupnagar’s monkeys had learned to live in the age of electricity.

From the Black Temple to Karbala, from Karbala to the Fort, from the Fort to the Ravan Wood, all was as before. For a long time he wandered there, he bathed himself in the scene, but he was not entirely satisfied. The mysteriousness that used to permeate everything seemed to have departed.

Calling to mind his former fears, he looked from afar at the Black Temple, at its big pipal tree, and at the stout monkey sitting on the topmost branch, but no amazement arose in his eyes, no amazement and no fear. Everything was as before, but perhaps he had changed, or perhaps his former relationship with it all had changed—his relationship with the Black Temple, with the big pipal tree, with the pipal's monkeys, with the silent enclosure of Karbala, with the Ravan Wood, with the banyan tree standing in the midst of it, perhaps with Sabirah too.

Unsatisfied, restless, tired, he went back to the house. The heat was intense. He took up a towel; crossing the courtyard that simmered in the afternoon sun, he went toward the bathing-room. The bathing-room was still the same as before, and couldn't be fastened from either inside or outside. People knew by intuition whether anyone was in it or not. But now perhaps he had lost his intuition, for he opened the panels of the bathing-room door—and then, before they were fully open, closed them. Lightning had struck in his eyes.

For a long time he was lost in that lightning-like moment. He was astonished to think that his cousin Tahirah was a full-grown woman. That day he couldn't even meet her eyes. The next day, avoiding her eyes, he inspected her from head to foot. That white, rounded body rose up in his imagination. With all its details. His cheeks reddened with shame. How many reproaches he heaped on himself in his heart! But Tahirah hadn't the slightest idea of it. She talked freely with him, and asked him every detail about the College.

"Zakir, does your College library have Rashid ul-Khairi's *Evening of Life*?"

"Yes, it does."

"Oh my God! Zakir, when you next come you absolutely must bring *Evening of Life*!"

Seeing that the talk had turned to novels, Sabirah too hesitantly approached, and squeezed in next to Tahirah. How passionately she was listening to the talk of novels! From the kitchen Khalah Jan's voice came, "Oh Tahirah, check on the food, don't let it burn. I'm kneading the flour."

When Tahirah went, Sabirah was left silent and ill at ease, but she wasn't even able to get up and go away. He too sat awkwardly, embarrassed.

Gradually he gathered his courage: "Sabirah, have you read *Paradise on Earth*?"

“No, is it a good novel?”

He at once began to tell her the plot of *Paradise on Earth*. He told her the whole story.

“Zakir, will you bring *Paradise on Earth* for me?”

“Yes, I’ll bring it when I come.”

“When will you come next?”

“During the Christmas vacation.”

He gradually told her the plots of several of Sharar’s other novels as well. Including those details that he was hesitant in mentioning, and she was shy about listening to, for Sabirah had now come close to him. She was somewhat bored now with the usual household tasks. While Khalah Jan and Tahirah did the housework, she sat listening to him and talking with him. Sometimes loud conversations, sometimes very soft ones. Sometimes so soft that the words became whispers, and Sabirah’s face reddened. And when, on the pretext of admiring her earrings, he touched the lobe of her ear, suddenly his breath grew warm and began to come faster. How soft and warm that earlobe was, so that a soft warm wave started in his fingertips and surged throughout his body.

•

The vacation was over so quickly. Rupnagar had caught hold of him, but after all he had to go back to the College, and before that he had to go and at least show his face to Ammi Jan at Vyaspur.

“Well, man, so you’re back? You said you’d spend a week there, and now you’ve stayed such a time!”

In response to Surendar’s remark he at first made some evasive reply, but how long could he keep the secret hidden?

“What did you do then?”

“What did I do? What could I have done? Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“It’s the truth, beyond that nothing more happened.”

“You’re really an oaf!” Surendar reproached him, and then fell silent.

Then he spoke as if to himself: “Yar, her hands were very soft.”

Surendar’s disgust vanished. “Really?”

“Yes.” He fell silent, immersed in thought, then very slowly said, “And her lips too.”

“Lips?” Surendar’s eyes opened wide with astonishment.

Then he went on confiding. What he hadn’t been able to tell there, he told when they were both back at the College, sitting comfortably together. When he had finished telling everything, he told everything again, and then told everything once more. Every time, he told it as if he were telling it for the first time.

“All right, now when are you going?”

“In the Christmas vacation.”

“That’s still far off.”

“Yes, yar! It’s still far off.”

“Write her a letter or something.”

“A letter, yes, I ought to write a letter.” And a letter-writing madness seized him, for days and weeks. Every day he sat down with pen and paper, wrote something, then tore it up.

“Yar, what should I write?”

“What you ought to write.”

“But yar! If someone else should read the letter, what then?”

“Then?” Surendar fell into thought. “She asked you for novels, didn’t she? All right, write that you don’t remember the names of the novels.”

“Just the thing.”

Then finally the Christmas vacation came, and he groped around in the library cupboards for novels by Rashid ul-Khairi and Sharar, and had them entered on his card.

“Yar, you’re not going to Rupnagar?”

“Why shouldn’t I go? I’m going. Tomorrow, as soon as the College closes, I’ll leave.”

Surendar paused, then said, “Yar, don’t go.”

“Why?”

“Yar, it’s a long trip, and there are reports of trouble in the trains.”

He fell into thought. “Yar, there’s trouble here too.”

“Yes, there’s some trouble here too. Something can happen at any moment.”

“Then?”

Surendar thought, then said, “We’ll go to Vyaspur, both of us together.”

The trip to Vyaspur had become an immensely long journey. Any traveler who moved around too much was now an object of suspicion. The platform

at Vyaspur was so silent. And when they came out, they were dumbfounded: “Yar, there aren’t any horse-carts here at all!”

“Then we’ll go on foot. After all, everyone else is going on foot.”

For a little while, the travelers who had gotten down from the train could be seen walking along ahead and behind. Then suddenly they realized that the street was empty. For a long way, the street was empty. The Jagat Talkies movie house, which was the noisiest place on the street, was closed and absolutely silent. The billboard-like affair on its front, which had been there for ages with the face of Kanan Bala smiling down from it, had fallen into the middle of the street. Kanan’s face had been torn in half, and bricks lay scattered all around in the street.

“Yar, we made a mistake,” Surendar said slowly. “We shouldn’t have come.”

Then they walked on in silence. The evening was deepening, and for a long way there was no one. Only bricks and more bricks. He looked with fear and wonder at the scattered bricks—imagine there being so many bricks in Vyaspur!

Walking on, they came to Meerut Gate. On the road straight ahead was Khirki Bazaar, which was shut and lightless. This was the road that came out in the Hindu neighborhoods. Nearby was a lane that went to the Muslim neighborhoods. At this fork both hesitated, looked at each other in silence, and set out on their different roads—

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“Zakir, my son! Did you hear it? They’re shooting outside.”

“Ammi Jan?” Coming back with difficulty from the thicket, he looked at Ammi Jan. She seemed about to faint; her voice was full of panic.

He rose and went to the window. He opened one shutter, and took a look outside. The rally-ground was in chaos. The tent-canopy had fallen to the ground; some of the canvas walls were still standing, while others were askew. Smoke was rising from one corner of the canopy. The crowd was in turmoil: some people were running away, others were fighting. He closed the window and came back. He muttered, “Nonsense.”

“*Ai hai*, I leaped up from my sleep. It’s like Doomsday! Then there was the sound of a shot. My heart began to pound. It’s still pounding. I called out to your father: ‘Well,’ I said, ‘Are you asleep, or awake?’ He muttered,

‘Do these wretches let anyone sleep?’ I said, ‘I thought I heard a gunshot.’ He began muttering, ‘From now on it’ll be this kind of thing.’ I said, ‘Whatever happens, you just mutter about it! Shall I go tell Zakir?’”

“Somebody must have fired. It’s nothing, really. This kind of thing happens in rallies nowadays.”

“*Ai*, my son! If bullets start flying like this, then what will happen?”

“Nothing will happen. You go back to sleep, and don’t worry.”

“You won’t believe it, I’m all shaken up inside.”

“Ammi, it’s nothing, please go to sleep.”

Sending Ammi off somehow, he once more opened the window and took a look outside. The crowd had dispersed, the rally-ground with its collapsed canopy lay empty, and all the lights were burning just as before. Where smoke had been rising from one corner of the canopy, the smoke was now only a thin thread.

In the lights, he watched the ruined, desolate, abandoned rally-ground for a long time. He had come back after a long journey, and was now breathing the air of his own time.

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TWO

THE RAIN poured down all night inside him. The dense clouds of memory seemed to come from every direction. Now the sky was washed and soft. Here and there a cloud swam contentedly in it, like a bright face, a soft smile. How deeply self-absorbed he was! For him, the outer world had already lost its meaning. Seated at the breakfast table, he ran an indifferent eye over the headlines and slid the newspaper toward Abba Jan.

Abba Jan had already eaten breakfast, and was absorbed in the Urdu newspaper. When Zakir sat down at the table, Abba Jan looked at him with surprise. “Zakir, don’t you have to go to the College today?”

“Yes I do. But I woke up late.”

“Then eat your breakfast quickly and go.” With these words, Abba Jan again turned to his newspaper.

He had certainly woken up late today, but he still wasn’t in any hurry. He had washed and dressed at a leisurely pace, now he was eating breakfast at a leisurely pace.

Ammi came and felt the teapot: “Hasn’t it gotten cold?”

“No, it’s not so cold yet, it’ll do,” he said, testing the pot with his palm and cupped fingers to make sure.

“Son, from now on please have your breakfast early! After all, I’m by myself. I have to do all the housework alone.” Then at once she addressed Abba Jan: “Well, what have they written about Dacca?”

“There’s no special news.”

Turning away from Abba Jan, she slid over to Zakir the English newspaper lying nearby: “Son, look in the English newspaper! There must be something in it?”

He again glanced over the newspaper and said indifferently, “No news worth mentioning.”

“Oh dear, then how will we get word of your Khalah Jan? There’s not even any news coming from there!”

“Trust in Him.” Abba Jan gestured with a finger toward the sky.

“Yes indeed, I trusted Him!” Ammi said with bitter anger. “Trusting Him was what brought me to this pass!”

Abba Jan looked gravely at Ammi, and then reprimanded her: “Zakir’s mother, a single heedlessly-spoken sentence is enough to wipe out a lifetime of piety.”

Repentantly, Ammi lowered her head. She fell silent. Then she began another topic: “Well, do you remember what I said to Batul then?”

“What did you say when?”

“When we left.”

“Zakir’s mother, when was the time you’re remembering? I don’t remember what you said to whom at the time!”

“Well, you may not remember—I remember every single word spoken at the time! The moment we arrived here I wrote her, ‘You come here, God is the Provider.’ She was ready to come here, but Tahirah’s husband was so crazy that he went to the East instead. The poor thing had to go there too, for her daughter’s sake.”

“Zakir’s mother! Hazrat Ali, peace be upon him, always used to say, ‘When wishes are thwarted, I recognize my Lord.’ Our wishes are dependent on His pleasure; what He desires, that’s what happens.”

Ammi once more fell silent and lowered her head, as though she bowed before the Divine will.

Abba Jan turned to him: “Perhaps you don’t have to go to the College today?”

“I’m just going.” Hastily he finished his last sip of tea, and rose.

Leaving the house, he stopped at the corner of the lane, at Nazira’s shop. Coming and going, he always stopped at that shop and bought cigarettes.

“Zakir, sir! There’s a lot of trouble today,” Nazira said abruptly, giving him the packet of cigarettes.

“And wasn’t there trouble yesterday?”

“But today there’s a lot of trouble.”

Today there was, in fact, a lot of trouble. When he reached the College he saw that here and there the big clay flowerpots had been smashed to pieces, the classrooms were empty, and the glass panes of the doors had been shattered, with broken glass lying both inside the classrooms and outside on the verandahs. The boys had disappeared. Where had they gone, all the boys? It seemed that all of them, shouting slogans, wreaking havoc, had left the college and run off somewhere else. He went to his office, sat down,

and remembered which lecture he was supposed to give today. But how could he give a lecture today? Pointlessly, aimlessly, he opened the drawer and shuffled some papers; he opened the books on the table and glanced through them, then closed them and put them aside. He couldn't decide what to do. He had left the house richly drenched in memories, self-absorbed, detached from the outside world. But in the time it took him to arrive here, the outside world had gradually taken on meaning. Now it was no longer possible for him to take advantage of the leisure and solitude to sit at his ease, smoking a cigarette, and lose himself in the world of his memories. Seeing the college all topsy-turvy, he felt a kind of oppression. Now what's to be done? All right, I'll go to the Shiraz. Perhaps the group might be there. No matter what, Irfan ought to be there at this hour. He stood up.

In a little while, he was in the Shiraz, sharing confidences with Irfan. Irfan was astonished!

"But after all, who was she?"

"She just was, and that's enough."

"And until now you've never even mentioned her?"

"I'd forgotten her. How could I have mentioned her?"

"You'd forgotten her?" Irfan looked at him in surprise.

"Yes, yar, I'd forgotten her. And a lot of time has passed."

"So why have you remembered her now?"

"This is the season when all my memories are returning. All kinds of forgotten things, from I don't know when, are coming back to me."

"Now, when there's so much turmoil everywhere?"

"Yes, now when there's so much turmoil everywhere." He paused, then spoke again. "Do you know what my mother does nowadays? Every morning when the paper comes, she asks what news there is from Dhaka. You know, don't you, that some of our relatives had settled in Dhaka? My Khalah Jan. So my mother is worried all the time, and every morning when the paper comes, she asks what news there is from Dhaka. And when she doesn't get a reassuring answer, she remembers that when we arrived here she wrote Khalah Jan a letter and advised her to come here: 'Don't go to the back of beyond, come here.' And then all kinds of forgotten bits of stories from the time of Emigration come to her mind."

"Then she's in Dhaka?" Irfan hazarded a guess.

"No, she never came to Pakistan at all."

“She didn’t come to Pakistan? I see.” He fell into thought. “And since then you haven’t been to India?”

“Never.”

“Then indeed a lot of time has passed.”

“That’s just what I’m thinking.” His voice sank to a whisper. “A lot of time has passed.”

“The procession is coming!” A group of frightened people entered with the news.

“Procession?” Various people sitting at the tables pricked up their ears.

“Yes, it’s a very big procession. It’s coming along breaking up things in its path.”

“Oh!”

Everybody sitting in the Shiraz was alarmed. A number of them rose and quickly left. Abdul shot out of the kitchen like an arrow, closed the door in an instant, and drew the curtains over the panes.

“Today there seems to be more trouble than usual,” Irfan muttered.

“Well, yesterday’s rumor turned out to be false.”

“But yesterday people took it as absolute truth.”

“Yes, yesterday it seemed to be absolutely true.”

“News and rumors both have a one-day lifespan. The next day, what difference does it make if you find out that it wasn’t news but rumor, or that it wasn’t rumor but news?”

Salamat and Ajmal entered by way of the kitchen. Salamat cast a ferocious glance all around, swept his pointing finger around the room, and said loudly, “I ask why the door is shut, and why the curtains are drawn, and why it’s dark!”

Irfan glared at Salamat and said coldly, “Because there’s a lot of noise outside.”

Salamat looked ferociously at both him and Irfan: “Yes, and because you don’t want to hear the voice of the people! But, you imperialist devil, this voice can no longer be suppressed. It will come ripping its way through curtains, and it’ll burst your eardrums too!” Then he called out, “Abdul!”

Abdul swiftly emerged from the kitchen. “Yes sir?”

“Abdul! Open the door, and draw back the curtain.”

“And let some light and air come in from outside. Light, air, and the voice of the people!” Ajmal added encouragingly.

“Don’t open the door. The procession is very rowdy,” a voice came from a distant table.

Salamat said furiously, “The masses are enraged against the capitalists and the imperialist flunkies!”

Then Salamat and Ajmal both sat down at his and Irfan’s table.

A white-haired man, who had been sitting alone for some time drinking tea, got up from his place, approached, and said, “You’re educated young men. Please tell me, what’s all this that’s happening?”

Salamat looked contemptuously at him and said, “What’s happening is what ought to happen.”

The white-haired man stared at Salamat’s face. Then he sighed, “God have mercy upon us,” and went back and sat down in his place.

“Yar,” said Salamat, “I feel that this white-haired man is even more ignorant than my white-haired father.”

“My father,” said Ajmal, “is more ignorant than your white-haired father and this white-haired man put together.”

“But my father is not my father.” Salamat ground his teeth. “I’m a bastard.”

Ajmal announced, “I refuse to consider my father as my father.”

“Yar, our disgusting fathers have ruined us.” Salamat’s voice was suddenly tearful.

Ajmal looked at Irfan, then at him: “Say something, you two.”

Then Salamat grew angry again: “They think that by staying silent they can save their disgusting fathers, and the bastard sons of their disgusting fathers, from the firing squad of time.” He pounded on the table. “But it can’t be done!”

“Salamat Sahib, you’re sitting here,” an acquaintance said, coming in through the kitchen, “and there in Gol Market the liquor shop is being looted.”

Ajmal gave a start. “Really?”

“Yes indeed, I’ve just come from there. Liquor is running in the gutters, and dogs are lying around dead drunk.”

“Then we’ve missed our chance again,” Ajmal murmured regretfully. He poked Salamat. “Come on, yar. Let’s at least go see.”

“Go where? To see what?” Salamat said irritably. “We don’t have to go to looted liquor shops to see dogs lying dead drunk! Where’s the lane in which you can’t see dogs lying dead drunk?” Then he gave the surrounding tables

a look so fiery that it shot out sparks, and yelled, “Dogs! You’ll have to wake up now! The day of reckoning is here: you’ll have to account for yourselves. You, me, everyone.”

“Except me,” Afzal said comfortably. Entering, he had heard Salamat roaring; he had come and stood by the table in silence. Now he slid a chair over and sat down opposite Salamat, and said, looking him in the eye, “Mouse! Why are you standing up on your tail? I’ll have to settle accounts with you! I’m only waiting for a bamboo flute.”

“For a flute, and for the city to burn down!” Salamat said angrily.

“The city’s burning right now.” Afzal closed his eyes, then opened them and spoke as though from another world. “Mice! You’ll rue the day when I come here with a flute in my hand! I’ll come and command you to listen to what the flute is saying. I’ll command you mice to follow me. You’ll come out of your holes and follow me, until I reach the ocean, and I’ll command the ocean, ‘Ocean! Take these mice!’ and in a single swallow the ocean will suck all you mice down into its maw.”

“Nonsense,” Salamat sneered.

“Yar, what’s the point of wasting time here? Come on, let’s go to Gol Market.” Ajmal seized Salamat’s arm, and they went out.

“Salamat is a disgusting person,” Afzal muttered, “and Ajmal too, and that flunky Zavvar too, who’s become even more disgusting now that he’s an officer. That whole tribe is made up of disgusting people.” Afzal paused to look at Zakir and Irfan, who sat in silence. “Yar, you two are good people, beautiful people. How rare beauty has become in the world! Myself for one, and then the two of you. Only three beautiful people.”

“From those three, strike out my name,” Irfan said with distaste.

“You’ll regret it!” Afzal gave Irfan an angry look.

“I know the list is yet to be greatly expanded,” Irfan said venomously.

Afzal gave him a steady stare. Abdul came by, making an inspection tour of various tables. He saw Afzal, and said respectfully, “Afzal Sahib, you’ve come? Shall I bring tea?”

“No.”

“Water?”

“No.”

When Abdul started to leave, Afzal addressed him: “Abdul, you’re a good person.” He pulled a diary out of his pocket, opened it and wrote something, then said, “On this date, I struck Irfan’s name from the list of

good people, and wrote your name instead." Then he addressed Irfan: "From today, you're an ugly person. And remember that the world is never without beautiful people."

Abdul silently slipped away. In a little while, he came back with a glass of cold water: "Here, Afzal Sahib, sir! Have some water."

Afzal looked gratefully at Abdul. "Abdul! You're a beautiful person." He drank the water, then asked, "Where did those two disgusting men go?"

"In Gol Market the liquor shop has just been looted. They went there, and you have to go there too," Irfan said in that same venomous voice.

Afzal gave Irfan a silent angry glare, then rose and went out.

"Yar, Afzal is a free spirit. Why do you tangle with him?" Zakir said.

"A free spirit?" Irfan muttered. "Who here is a free spirit?"

"I mean, he's a free-wheeling type. He's not a political hack by any means."

"Yar, it's like this: I can't stand fake revolutionaries, and I can't stand fake prophets either."

"Then who's genuine?"

"They're all fake, including me." Irfan paused, then asked, "Do you know how much Comrade Salamat's bank balance is?"

"Salamat's bank balance? Yar, he's the penniless type. What work does he do, to earn enough to have a bank balance?"

"Zakir, you don't realize. He does a great deal," Irfan said meaningfully, and then fell silent.

"Yar, I don't understand any of this."

"What is there not to understand? Nothing is hidden any longer. It's written on people's foreheads who they are and what they're doing." Then in a different tone he said, "Well, yar, let's drop the subject."

"Yes, yar, what's it to us?"

"Yes, what's it to you? You're somewhere else nowadays." Irfan, whose face was still quite tense, relaxed a bit and smiled. "Zakir, have you been getting any letters from over there?"

"Letters? No."

"What I mean is, since coming here you must surely have written. And you must have gotten an answer?"

"No," he said shamefacedly. "I haven't written. And no letter has come from her."

“You mean from that time till now there’s been no correspondence, no exchange of messages at all?”

“No.”

“And now you’re remembering her? Yar, you’re a wonder!”

Really, how strange it is, he thought. Since coming here I haven’t written to her, nor has she written to me. The thick cloud of memories again began to envelop him. A dimly lit road, then complete darkness, then an illumined zone, a glowing memory.

•

How tall Sabirah had grown, and how her bosom had swelled out, so that now she always kept it covered with her dupattah, but those two round swellings still made themselves apparent. Their conversations were sometimes loud, sometimes soft—sometimes so soft that his voice became a whisper and Sabirah’s cheeks reddened with embarrassment. After returning to the College, on Surendar’s advice he wrote her a long letter.

“Zakir! Did you mail the letter?”

“Yar, I mailed it, but—” He stopped in mid-sentence.

“But what?”

“Yar, what if she understands?”

“Why else did you write the letter? You wrote it so she’d understand.”

“Yar, if she understands, then—?” He broke off in the middle.

“Then what will happen?”

“She’ll think that—”

•

The sound of someone banging on the door: “Open up!” Suddenly returning from the illumined zone of memory, he looked around in the dimly lit atmosphere. Someone was banging on the door, and the people sitting at the tables were watching the door anxiously.

“Don’t open it, the procession is nearby.”

“There’s no telling who it is!”

“It’s people from the procession, don’t open the door.”

“Go on, open up, or else they won’t care, they’ll take revenge, they’ll burn the place down!” Abdul came out of the kitchen and went to the door. Pulling back the curtain slightly, he looked out through the pane—and was

reassured. Opening one leaf of the door a little, he hurriedly brought in the new arrivals and at once shut the door again.

“Friends, you banged so loudly on the door that you frightened us!” an acquaintance said to the regulars who had come in.

“But how can frightened people frighten anyone?”

“How are things outside?”

“Bad. There’s a lot of destruction.”

With his heart and mind full of memories, he halfway heard and halfway didn’t hear. He had come back from the zone of memories the way a sleeper might suddenly wake, with sleep still filling his eyes. The sleep-spirit might then come like the touch of a breeze, and he would again be oblivious and dead to the world. Memory-images were floating around him.

•

Then Sabirah was moving in his imagination, when she had come to Vyaspur for a few days. In those days we two had come close to each other. When the engine whistled, she too was drawn up to the open roof, where I still came when I was home from Meerut during the vacations, to sit from evening into night, watching the fields that went on into the distance, beyond the fields the railroad tracks, beyond the railroad tracks the rows of trees. We both stood leaning on the parapet, our heads touching. We watched the whistling, smoke-spitting engine, and the moving, lighted cars that followed it. In the day, these cars looked separate, but in the dark of night they were like a row of lamps strung together and moving. The row of lamps was drawn along, it came running along. When it passed, Sabirah would say with delight and wonder, “What a long train it was, car after car. Which train was it?”

“The Delhi train.”

She was amazed. “This train goes to Delhi!”

“Yes, of course.”

She was silent for a little. “Zakir, you must have seen Delhi? What’s it like, Delhi?”

“I’ve only gone once, but after my exams, I’ll go there to live.”

“Really! How?” She was astonished.

“I’ll go there and work.”

“Really?”

Night was falling. The moon had not yet come out. But there were a few stars, twinkling like distant lamps in the expanse of the sky. I looked steadily at Sabirah's wondering face.

"Sabirah!"

"Huh?"

"Sabirah, if I should get a job in Delhi then—then—" My tongue began to stumble. "Then—we two can live together there."

"What?" She looked at me with surprise, as though she didn't understand at all. I went on looking silently at her; and then as though she had suddenly understood something, she all at once slipped away.

The next day she and I avoided each other's eyes, but when night fell, the whistle of the engine and the clanking of the wheels again brought her to the roof. Keeping her distance from me, she stood with her chin on the parapet. But the train paused in its journey, somewhere in the shelter of the trees, and the engine went on whistling. We drew nearer to each other, very near indeed. So near that I could feel the warmth of her body, and its softness as well.

After that, we leaned on each other with more confidence as we watched the Delhi trains come and go. With our chins propped side by side on the cool parapet full of spots of dark mold, we watched the trains moving sometimes slowly, sometimes fast. Now we no longer had any questions about this train, as though our plan of traveling in it to Delhi had been agreed upon.

Then letter after letter came from Khalah Jan, saying to send Sabirah home. Ammi said, "*Ai hai*, Batul is driving me mad! These are bad times, how can I send her?"

"Ammi! Shall I take her?"

Abba Jan looked hard at me, and said, "The times are very bad."

•

"I've heard, sir, that there's been shooting."

"What?" He looked at the speaker with a start. The speaker was Abdul, who was collecting the empty teacups. His face looked anxious. "I don't know, sir, but a man just came from the Regal, he was saying so."

He had come back from his forest, and was staring at Abdul's face.

“These are bad times, sir.” As Abdul spoke, he picked up the tray full of empty teacups and took it away.

“I think we should go out.”

“Out?” He looked at Irfan with surprise.

“Yes. After all, how long can we sit here, shut up inside? And besides, it’s almost time for me to be at work.”

“Then what’s the point of my staying on alone? I’ll go home.”

“Anyway, let’s go out, and we’ll see.”

Outside things had changed a great deal. He looked with wonder at the road. In the morning, going to the College, he had passed along this road. Then it was clean and neat, as usual. Cars, scooters, bicycles, scooter-cabs were rushing to their various destinations. Buses packed with people were in rapid motion. The fast-moving scooter-cabs were jockeying for position, urgently trying to dart in front of each other. But now the whole street was full of scattered bricks. Here and there among the scattered bricks lay gleaming fragments of broken glass from bus windows and car windows. A half-burned double-decker bus lay helplessly in the middle of the street, but it wasn’t blocking traffic. How much traffic was there to block? One or two cars, trying to avoid the bricks, crept timidly past the double-decker, and suddenly accelerated once they had cleared it. Then after a long time, the sound of a bus noisily coming by, jolting over the bricks, and passing indifferently on.

As he passed near the petrol pump, he saw that a crowd had gathered. The crowd were staring with wonder at a long car that lay overturned, its four wheels pointing toward the sky and its roof against the ground.

Passing by the wondering crowd, he went on. In front of the National Auditorium a furious crowd had gathered. A respectable gentleman, entering the Auditorium, hesitated: “Excuse me, sir, is the speech over?”

“You’d do better to ask whether it’s begun!”

“So the speech hasn’t taken place?”

“No,” a young man said angrily. “The imperialist pimps, the sons of bitches! Their time to make speeches is finished!”

A motorbike, dashing along, pulled over and stopped: “What’s happening up there now?”

“They’re throwing chairs.”

The motorbike rider pulled out a pistol, fired it into the air, restarted the motorbike, and vanished.

“Yar! His car must be parked over there?”

“Good idea. The pimp looted the poor to buy it, let’s burn it!”

Ammi welcomed him with a pounding heart and terrified eyes, made the gesture of taking his misfortunes onto herself,* lifted her hand and said tearfully, “Oh God, thanks be to You.”

“What’s happened?” He looked at Ammi with surprise.

“*Ai*, my son! I was terrified. People in the neighborhood were saying that there was firing. My heart stopped beating. I was in a state of panic, I went again and again to the door. I kept praying, ‘*Ai*, God, my son has gone out, let him come back safely.’”

“Has Zakir come?” Abba Jan’s voice came from the outer room.

“Go, my son, show your face to your father and then come back. He was worried too.”

When he entered the room, he saw that Khvajah Sahib was sitting with Abba Jan.

“Son! Where’s my Salamat?” Khvajah Sahib asked the question abruptly.

“I saw Salamat in the afternoon, then he went off somewhere with Ajmal.”

“The wretch must have gone off with the procession.”

“With the procession?—I don’t know.”

“The wretch has caused me a lot of worry,” Khvajah Sahib muttered angrily. “I’ve heard there was firing?”

“Firing?—No.”

“If there hasn’t been firing yet, there will be.”

“Has a curfew been imposed?” Abba Jan asked somberly.

“Not yet.”

“How long can it be before it happens? May God the Most High have mercy on this country.” Abba Jan sighed.

“Maulana! In Amritsar—now *there* was a curfew! Anyone who once stuck his head out the window never got a chance to pull it back in again. The moment a head appeared, they fired.”

“Brother, when was all this?”

“Maulana, this happened at the time of Jallianwala Bagh. What a great fire was started then! For three nights no one lit a lamp in his house, there was so much light from the fire.”

“Oh?” Zakir looked with surprise at Khvajah Sahib.

“Yes, son! Would I tell a lie, now in my old age? It was the biggest petrol pump in Amritsar, the one where the Sahibs’ cars were filled with petrol. It burned for three days and three nights. The flames reached to the sky. Then what happened was that the bank was looted, then the looting spread to the cloth market. Then a curfew was imposed. It was a curfew like the wrath of God! When anybody stuck his head even a tiny bit out the window, there was the crack! of a rifle, and he dropped like a stone.”

“The Europeans did so many cruel things,” Abba Jan muttered.

“Maulana, everyone has oppressed us, the foreigners too and our own people too. Aren’t there cruel things going on right now?” He paused, then said, “But, really, the English were held in so much awe. What authority they had! Proclamation was made that whoever had looted any property should put it outside his house by evening. After that, the houses would be searched. I tell you, Maulana-ji, you won’t believe it, but people who hadn’t looted a scrap of cloth put their own property out in the street. People even piled their daughters’ dowries outside their houses. By evening, the streets of Amritsar were heaped with satins and brocades.”

Abba Jan listened in silence, smoking his huqqah. Then he cleared his throat and said, “God bless him, my venerable father always told how in ’57 there was such a strict curfew that they had to keep even the bodies of the dead in the house for three days sometimes. They couldn’t even get a piece of plain cloth for a shroud, and they couldn’t even get a grave for the burial. They would wrap the body in coarse sacking, and in the dark of night, making sure that no soldier was watching, they would bury the body right there in the lane.” He fell silent, then said sadly, “What hard times Muslims have faced!”

“But, Maulana, now what times are coming upon the Muslims?”

Abba Jan raised his forefinger toward the sky: “Only He knows.”

“Maulana! Let me tell you one thing: we’re destined to endure bad times at the hands of our sons. I tried to make Salamat see reason: ‘Son, your wits are wandering. Why do you ruin your throat yelling slogans?’ And what answer does he give me, but ‘We’re going to change the system!’”

Abba Jan said gravely, “Khvajah Sahib! In this world there have lived one hundred twenty-four thousand Prophets, and has the world changed?”

“No sir, it hasn’t changed.”

“Then when the Prophets haven’t been able to change the world, how will your boy and mine change it?”

“Maulana, you’re quite right. The world cannot change.”

“Khvajah Sahib, I’ve reached such an age—what times have come and then gone again! Each time I’ve seen the same result. Some hot-blooded types have had their blood cooled forever. As for the rest, they’ve looked out for their own interests, and made their own deals.”

“Sir, you’re absolutely right. Please, Maulana, tell this to that bastard Salamat.”

“His blood is still hot, he won’t be able to understand it yet. It can only be understood after living a long time. And Khvajah Sahib! I now no longer intervene, under any circumstances.”

“You’re very right. In Pakistan, there’s no point in speaking out.”

“Khvajah Sahib, there’s no point in speaking out anywhere.”

“Yes sir, exactly, exactly. Whoever speaks out is arrested. At least, we’ve seen this happen in Pakistan.”

Abba Jan silently slid the huqqah over toward himself, took the mouthpiece in his mouth, and was lost in thought.

Khvajah Sahib sat in silence. Then suddenly he addressed Zakir: “In the afternoon he was with you?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then he didn’t go off with the procession?”

“I don’t know.”

“The bastard,” Khvajah Sahib muttered angrily. Then he said, “The truth is that his mother is very worried. I told her, ‘Count your blessings—you have sons. Be patient about your son,’ but she couldn’t be patient.” He paused, then said, “How could she be patient? One son went to Dhaka and got trapped there, one son is ruining himself here.”

“Have you had any letters from Karamat?”

“That’s the worry, that we haven’t had any letters from him.”

“Place your trust in Him.” Abba Jan gestured with his finger toward the sky.

“Well, we do place our trust in Him. Maulana Sahib! That Karamat of mine is so lovable, so obedient and respectful. Look how the Lord arranged it: the one who’s a vagabond and a ruffian is here grinding our hearts into powder, while the well-behaved one has gone and got trapped there, poor boy.” As he spoke, he stood up.

Abba Jan, smoking his huqqah, watched Khvajah Sahib. “Are you going?”

“Yes, I’ll go check at home. That worthless wretch might perhaps have come back.”

“Yes, go then.”

“Maulana Sahib, do pray for the wretch. His mother worries about him all the time.”

Abba Jan again raised his finger toward the sky: “He is the Protector.”

Khvajah Sahib took his leave, and Abba Jan picked up his huqqah and went inside. Zakir was very tired. The moment he lay down, he began to feel sleepy. He closed his eyes, but sleep was only hovering around him, it didn’t descend. He couldn’t tell how long he lay there with his eyes shut, half asleep and half awake. Suddenly someone banged on the door.

“‘Open this heavy door,* let me come in!’” Afzal’s voice came from outside.

He rose and opened the door. Afzal entered, and behind him Salamat and Ajmal.

“Zakir!” Afzal first looked at him, then gestured toward Salamat and Ajmal: “I’ve forgiven these fellows, you forgive them too.”

He couldn’t decide how to answer Afzal. Afzal said imperiously, “I’m telling you, forgive them! I’ve taken them under my protection.” Then he said kindly, “Zakir, these two are good people.” As he spoke, he sat down in a chair and addressed Ajmal: “Fellow! Bring out what you’ve got with you.”

Ajmal, sitting down in a chair, put his bag on the table. Opening it, he pulled out a bottle and placed it on the table. Zakir looked with fear and amazement at the bottle. “Yar, not here!”

“What?” Afzal looked attentively at him.

He said nervously, “Yar, you know my father is very strict in these matters.”

Salamat laughed contemptuously. “Your father!”

“Yar, that white-bearded fellow, that’s your father, isn’t he?” Afzal asked. “Never mind about him, he’s like my own child. I’ll explain to him, you go and bring some glasses.”

“Nothing can be explained to fathers.” Salamat laid down the law.

“Do you judge other people’s fathers by your own?” Afzal said.

“He’s not my father!” Salamat yelled.

“Then whose father is he?” Afzal asked innocently.

“I don’t know, but I know he’s not my father. I’m a bastard,” he said, grinding his teeth furiously.

“Is there any proof?”

“The proof is that I say it!”

“That’s no proof. Fellow! Before making this announcement, you should have asked your mother.”

“I did ask her.”

“Then?”

“The ignorant woman refused to give evidence,” he said in a grief-stricken voice. Then he said sadly, “Our fathers are cruel and our mothers are ignorant.” Even as he spoke, he began to weep.

When Ajmal saw Salamat weeping, tears began to fall from his own eyes as well.

“Fellow, why are you weeping?”

“Yar! My mother is even more ignorant than Salamat’s mother. When I asked her, first she slapped me, then she began to tear her hair and scream.”

Afzal stared at Ajmal, then at the weeping Salamat, and his eyes grew red with anger. “You’re both disgusting people!”

Ajmal looked toward Salamat. Salamat announced, “Afzal speaks the truth, we’re disgusting people.”

“I refuse to take you under my protection. Disgusting people! Get out of here. This is a virtuous person’s house.”

Salamat stood up. Ajmal put the bottle in the bag, and followed Salamat out of the house.

“Zakir! You’re a good person, forgive me.”

“Yar, what kind of talk is this?”

“No, forgive me.”

“For what?” He looked at Afzal with concern.

“I tried to give two evil spirits power over a virtuous person. I committed a sin. *Ai* good person! Forgive me, I’m a sinner.” As he spoke, his voice choked, and tears began to well up in his eyes. “We’re sinners, and we’re in torment.”

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THREE

TODAY he found Mall Road peaceful, and he was melancholy. What a terrifying scene it had offered yesterday! Cars with their windows smashed, and a half-burned double-decker that lay all day in the middle of the road, had proclaimed the devastation that had happened here. After the brick-hurling, slogan-shouting procession, the nervous pedestrians, the closing shops with their rapidly falling shutters, there had been only the occasional timid bus or scooter-cab, picking its way through scattered bricks and glass. Now there was peace, and the road was clean from one end to the other. No scattered bricks, no fragments of glass. The flow of traffic moved evenly. Cars traveling at their ease, a second after the first, a third after the second. None of their windows seemed to be broken. He was amazed: yesterday it seemed that all the cars in the city had had their windows broken, but now all the cars in the city were in fine condition. And the double-decker that as late as yesterday evening had been lying half-burned in the middle of the road—where had it gone? Yes, the overturned car near the petrol pump was still lying there on its back. But now the pedestrians' eyes showed no anxiety or astonishment, as though the car had been overturned in some other age and by now, with the passage of time, had lost its power to surprise.

Passing by the Metro Wines shop, he looked carefully at the broken glass both inside and outside. The shattered panes were testifying to all that had happened here yesterday. Today nothing had happened, but still something had come over Mall Road. However strange yesterday's tumult had seemed, today's silence seemed even stranger. It also seemed strange that on the College verandahs all the potted plants that yesterday had been overturned were now nicely arranged. Order and organization had returned to the College. The classes were being held in the proper way. Outside, in the grounds, groups of students were walking around. Overnight, how peaceful the students had become. As late as yesterday, what a state they were in! At every little thing their faces would redden, the veins of their necks would

stand out, they would put their throats to the fullest use. Insults, slogans. And the slogans were extraordinarily powerful, for in a single moment such a large procession would spring forth that the college compound was too narrow for it and it spilled over outside. And now? Now it was so peaceful that no one even raised his voice. People were talking, but in whispers.

"Yar! My brother came by the night flight."

"Really?"

"He left after the action started?"

"It started just at that moment. He said it was difficult to get from the Intercontinental to the airport. Nothing but tanks on the streets. He says that as they were going toward the plane there was a roar as though a cannon had been fired, and then there were constant gunshots, as if a war had begun. And when the plane took off and he looked out, far into the distance there was nothing but clouds of smoke."

"Really?"

"But what will happen?"

"Whatever may happen, the damned Bengalis have had the wind taken out of their sails!"

"Bastards!" someone muttered to himself. "This will straighten them out!"

Joy, disgust, hatred, rage—every emotion was expressed in whispers. He began to feel suffocated. He wanted to escape from this stifling atmosphere.

"The Mulla goes only* as far as the mosque." He went of course to the Shiraz, but there too the atmosphere was stifling. No noise, no confusion, no bursts of laughter, no loud voices. Only the expressions on people's faces showed that some serious matter was being discussed.

"Yar, yesterday there was so much turmoil here—and today—"

"Yes! And today," Irfan muttered to himself, and began drinking his tea.

"Yar, yesterday I was really afraid. It seemed that toda—" He himself didn't know what he wanted to say.

"So it was for the best," Irfan said ironically.

"In one respect, it was for the best."

"We say this every time, but later we find out that it wasn't for the best."

"Yar, I don't understand any of this."

"I don't understand any of it either, but it seems to me that something's happened."

"What has happened?

“It isn’t clear. But what’s the good of clarity? What I feel obscurely is everything.”

What was it that Irfan felt obscurely? What was the fear creeping through him? Zakir didn’t understand any of it. Then he changed the subject.

“Yar, where are Salamat and Ajmal today?”

“Today they’re in their holes. They come out of their holes when it’s the right weather for coming out of holes. Today the weather has changed.”

“Look, that crackpot has come,” Irfan said, seeing the door opening.

“What crackpot?”

“Yar, that white-haired man,” he whispered, as the white-haired man entered and came straight toward them.

“May I sit down? I’ll only take a few minutes.”

“Of course, of course.” As he spoke he glanced at Irfan, whose expression showed that he didn’t care for this interruption.

“What’s your opinion, was it for the best, or not?”

“What’s your opinion? It was very much for the best!” Irfan said bitterly.

“I don’t know whether it was for the best or not, I only know that if Pakistan can be saved this way—”

“Which way, this way?” Irfan grew angry.

The white-haired man regarded Irfan, then said calmly, “You’re looking at my hair?”

“I’m looking at your hair, it’s all white. Do you want to base some appeal on it?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“I want to tell you how my hair became white.”

“What difference will it make if you tell us?”

“A big difference.” He paused, then said, “When I set out from my home, my hair was all black. And I wasn’t any age at all, I was only twenty or twenty-one. When I reached Pakistan and washed myself and looked in the mirror, my hair had turned entirely white. That was my first day in Pakistan. I left my home with black hair and my family, when I reached Pakistan my hair was white and I was alone.” He fell silent and went away, without waiting to see the effect of his words, as though he had said what he had to say. Now he sat down calmly in his corner, and gave Abdul an order for tea.

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He glanced out the window, where after so many nights the rally-ground was now empty and silent. Well, maybe it was for the best. A procession one day, a procession the next day. With a sigh of satisfaction he leaned back against the cushion. Tonight he'd be able to sleep in peace. He tried one position, then a second, then a third. Sleep was miles away from his eyes tonight. Controlling his desire to toss and turn, he lay silently with his eyes closed for a long time, as though any moment he might go off to sleep. But his mind went on talking, telling stories from different times and places, some new ones and some ages old. Today I somehow managed to finish the Mughal period. Teaching history is a bore. And studying history? The boys ask absurd questions. And the mind? A boy stood up: "Sir?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sir! Among the Mughals, were all the brothers stepbrothers?"

"Sit down. Out of this whole history, is that the only question you've found to ask?"

I scolded him and made him sit down. A meaningless question. It's meaningless to distinguish full brothers from stepbrothers. Cain and Abel weren't stepbrothers. In history, and before history. Myths, tales, fables, stories of brothers. Those who while their father was alive—those who after their father's death—it's time to go to sleep. After all, in the morning I have to go to the College. Again the same wretched history. How boring it is teaching history to boys. And studying history? Other people's history can be read comfortably, the way a novel can be read comfortably. But my own history? I'm on the run from my own history, and catching my breath in the present. Escapist. But the merciless present pushes us back again toward our history. The mind keeps talking. Are you looking at my hair? I'm looking, it's all white. Irfan answered that poor man's straightforward question in such a bitter tone. I want to tell you how it became white—when I reached Pakistan my hair was white and I was alone. His first day in Pakistan. The white-haired man swam before Zakir's eyes. And my own first day. My first day in Pakistan—

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FOUR

HE WASHED, and looked in the mirror, and he realized that his hair, which when he left home had been entirely black, was now entirely white. It was his first day in this land. And my own first day? Days from the past crowded into his imagination. But I'm looking for my first day in this land. Pushing and shoving, he forced his way through the encircling crowd of days and went on. Where's my first day? As he steadily forced his way through the crowd, a day in the form of a dim, misty memory came and stood before him.

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Anarkali Bazaar partly closed, partly open. A few shops here and there open, the rest shut up and locked. The bazaar crowded, but no one buying. He went out and came to a big road. Mall Road, horse-carts, bicycles, an occasional car, a few buses passing from time to time. A tall man, stout and broadly built, with a crested turban on his head and very wide trousers, passed by him, taking long strides. He watched him with wonder. Then he saw so many men of the same stature and build, with the same outfits on, walking nearby. These shapes were new to him. Everything around was new to him. As he went on, it seemed to him that he was walking on a new earth. He was enjoying this new earth very much. From one street to another, from the second to a third, he lost track of time as he walked on, but he never felt the least bit tired. It had been so long since he had walked around freely, without the fear that at any moment someone passing by would slip a knife into his ribs.

"My dear boy! Where were you all day?"

"Hakim-ji, I was looking at Pakistan."

"Now that there's no longer anything else to look at, we have to look at Pakistan! What's the hurry? You could at least have come in the afternoon

and had your lunch.”

Then Hakim-ji again immersed himself in conversation with Abba Jan. Zakir ate his dinner, and went and lay down in the room where he was to sleep. He examined the room. What a clean, neat, and open room it was, and how filled with light! There was a light fixture in each of its four corners. It occurred to him to wonder who might have lived here before. That thought reminded him of his own room, a small room with discolored walls, a cot, a table full of books, and among the books a lamp that shed a dim light by which he studied far into the night. My room must be empty tonight. As he lay in the large, well-lit room, he poignantly remembered the shabby room he had left behind. The sleep that had come into his eyes vanished. He tossed and turned for a long time. Hearing the sound of Abba Jan coughing, he stopped in the midst of his tossing and turning. Oh, so Abba Jan has had enough of the Hakim Sahib’s company, and has come to bed—but when did he come? He hadn’t been at all aware of Abba Jan’s coming. Anyway, he lay for a long time without moving, as though he were asleep, but sleep didn’t come. The image of his own room was fixed in his brain. Then he covered his face with the sheet and wept.

“Zakir, are you awake?”

“Yes.” He tried to keep his mood from showing in his voice.

Then he lay for a long time without moving, as though he were asleep. He couldn’t tell how long he’d been lying like that. Finally he turned over. In a little while he shifted his position again. Then he got up, had a drink of water, and lay down again.

“Zakir!”

“Abba Jan?” He had thought Abba Jan was asleep, but he was awake.

“What’s the matter, can’t you sleep? You were awake all last night. Go to sleep.”

“I can’t get to sleep.”

“Yes, it’s a new place, and the first night,” Abba Jan said hesitantly. He fell silent, then said, “It’s happened to me like this before too, that I went to some new place and the first night I couldn’t sleep at all.”

Zakir covered his face with the sheet; his eyes had again filled with tears.

That night with its sleeplessness glowed more and more brightly in his imagination. That day, with its night, was within his grasp. So that was my first day in this land. The whole day I walked on a fresh earth under a fresh

sky, suffused with happiness. Then night came, and my sleepless eyes were wet with tears.

That day seemed very pure to him, with its night, with the tears of its night. I had forgotten that day. He was surprised—such a luminous day! After that, the days gradually grew soiled and dirty. Perhaps it's always like this. The days go on passing, and the purity of the first day is gradually lost as the days revolve. How quickly the purity of our days was lost, how quickly the coolness fled from our nights! But still that one day, my first day in this land, should always shine in my memory. But with this thought some neighboring days were illumined too, and gathered around that one day. A constellation of illumined days came together. When Pakistan was still all new, when the sky of Pakistan was fresh like the sky of Rupnagar, and the earth was not yet soiled. In those days how the caravans arrived from their long long journeys! Every day caravans entered the city and dispersed among the streets and neighborhoods. Wherever people could find a place to lay their heads, they flopped down. Whoever got hold of a spacious house found himself giving shelter, at first by free choice and then out of compassion, to new arrivals, until the spacious house began to seem narrow. The refugees told whole long epics about how much suffering they had endured on the journey, and how many difficulties they had overcome in order to reach the city. They told about those whom they had left behind. Then the refuge-givers and the refugees together remembered those who had clung to the earth, refusing to leave their homes and their ancestors' graves. They told about those who had set out with them but had become separated on the road, and about those whom they had left on unknown roads, unshrouded and unburied. They all shared their grief, remembering those left behind. Their hearts overflowed, and their eyes filled with tears. Then they dried their eyes and began to think about the future here, and how they would manage.

When reunions took place, how variously people met! Sometimes, walking through the bazaar, two people would encounter each other.

"My God, how did you come here?"

"Brother, I just couldn't live a good life there any more, so I said to myself, 'Come on, let's get out of here.' So I just tied up my bedding and got a seat on one of the Specials."

Sometimes there would be an unexpected knock on the door. When the door opened, sometimes there would be a horse-cart crammed with

passengers and luggage standing outside; and sometimes a man alone, unshaven, covered with dust, his clothes torn and stained, without any baggage at all. At first glance his face was unrecognizable. When recognition came, with it came amazement: “Why, it’s you!” Then he was urgently embraced, and asked question after question. “How did you come? Was it all right on the road? Where’s everybody else? Did you travel alone? Where are your things?”

“How could it be all right on the road? The train was attacked.”

“May God protect us all! Then?”

“God did protect us, we escaped with our life and honor; otherwise we wouldn’t have had a chance.”

“Thanks be to God! Where’s everybody else?”

“In Walton Camp.”

“When this house is here, why are you staying in a camp?”

“I thought I should find out first whether there was space in the house or not.”

“There ought to be space in people’s hearts!”

Even in houses, there was no shortage of space. In Shamnagar, there were so many empty houses. So many houses lying open! The doors and windows were all open, and through the open windows the whole house, full of furnishings and utensils, could be seen. It seemed that the owners had suddenly stood up, shaken the dust from their feet, and walked out. There were also houses with big heavy locks on them, and all the ground-floor windows carefully closed. It seemed that the owners had locked up their houses and gone on a long journey, with the thought of coming back. In some houses an occasional window in an upper floor had carelessly been left unfastened, and now when the wind was strong the window blew open and shut, banging and banging. Some houses stood half-finished, some were left all but complete. The owners of the houses must be searching in faraway cities for any place to lay their heads; while people who had come from faraway cities were striving to find a place to live in these houses. There was lots of space in the houses. There was even more space in people’s hearts. In the two-story house he had occupied, Hakim Bande Ali had given shelter to so many families. Nanua arrived after both floors were already full.

“Hakim-ji, I’ll stay, sir, on this outside verandah.”

“Yes, yes, I’m very willing. Why not, when it’s right here?”

Nanua and his family made their camp in the outer verandah.

Those were good days, good and sincere. I ought to remember those days, or in fact I ought to write them down, for fear I should forget them again. And the days afterward? Them too, so I can know how the goodness and sincerity gradually died out from the days, how the days came to be filled with misfortune and the nights with ill omen. How before our eyes the houses of Shamnagar went from being spacious to being narrow, and the space in people's hearts kept diminishing. The string of caravans had been broken off. Now only an occasional person came along, and sometimes a family or so, and wandered around in Shamnagar. They couldn't find a place to lay their heads. All the houses in Shamnagar were already full, the open ones, and the locked ones, and the half-finished ones too. The locked house with that unfastened upper-floor window that banged open and shut with a terrifying noise when the afternoon and night winds blew, now had children and young people coming and going through its doors, and a bamboo shade over its upper-floor window. Some of the upper-floor windows had bamboo shades over them, some had colorful curtains, some had screens of thick jute sacking. The high roof-parapets, which so recently had been desolate, were now festooned with many colors of wet clothes spread out to dry. The eggshell-colored house, with its open doors showing the furnished rooms inside, now had water buffaloes tied up in the left-hand verandah, and in the drawing room the furniture was all piled up on one side, and the other side was covered with chaff and with mounds of cow-dung cakes for fuel. Now there was no longer any absolute poverty to be seen in Shamnagar. The conditions of life, which at the time of Emigration had steadily narrowed until they were limited to covering the body and filling the stomach, had again widened, and continued to widen and extend themselves. The houses that had given shelter to a number of families now shook the rest of the families off their necks and were home to one family alone. But at the same time they seemed less adequate, and the needs of those who lived in them had increased. In the houses that were still crammed full of different families, every family was trying to spread out as it widened its sense of the necessities of life. Some residents gradually spread beyond their borders and were inclined to expand into the territory of others. From the others came resistance. Then quarrels, then men's hands were raised against each other. The combatants first fought inside, then gradually their battle moved outside. The neighbors began by watching the

show. Then they intervened. Some smart operator would wheel and deal and get the whole house allotted in his name alone. Then the rest of the residents packed up all their goods and went out in search of a new place to stay. Anyone who was reluctant to leave the house was drawn into court cases and lawsuits.

"Hakim-ji! Has Nanua gone away?" I saw with astonishment that there was nothing left on the verandah but an abandoned cooking stove, and went to ask Hakim Bande Ali, where he had his dispensary in the adjoining room.

"What else could he do but go, when the police came and began throwing his pots and pans out into the street?" He fell silent, then said, "I'm looking for a house too."

"You!"

"Yes, I too. Rather than be humiliated at the hands of the police, it's better to go voluntarily."

"But you came to this house before anyone else, you were the one who gave us all shelter!"

"Son, 'the sleeper's female calf turns male.'* Munshi Musayyab Husain managed to wheel and deal and get an order in his name." He paused, then said, "He has no heart at all. He won't let anyone stay on here."

I went inside and reported, "Abba Jan! Nanua has left."

Abba Jan made no reply.

"And the Hakim-ji too is looking for a house."

Abba Jan acted as though he hadn't heard at all, but Ammi said, "When will you go look for a house?"

"Will we have to leave too?"

"Why, do you think you've got some special charm to protect us?"

"Ammi! The Munshi wasn't like this there."

Ammi sighed. "Since they've come here, people have lost all feeling. You won't remember it, but when your grandfather was alive, this Munshi Musayyab Husain used to sit humbly at our doorstep. Behold the glory of God, that now he looks down his nose at us!"

Abba Jan regarded her with some displeasure, and said, "My late father in his time treated everyone generously, but he never reminded them of it."

"I never remind people of it either, but when you're upset inside, it's hard to keep your tongue quiet! There, he was nothing. And since we've come here, 'the bald man has gotten fingernails'!"*

“Zakir’s mother,” Abba Jan said reprovingly, “God the Most High does not love the arrogant.”

“Yes, but you were never arrogant. And how much the Lord has loved you! Today you don’t even have a place to lay your head!” Ammi said bitterly, and fell silent.

I got up quietly and stole out. The thought of leaving that house didn’t much trouble me. The truth was that I’d never been able to become very attached to the house, and for the room in which I spread out my bedding I felt no affection at all. I found myself constantly remembering the room I’d left behind. Such small, trivial things had suddenly become so significant! While I was sitting, or as I walked along, some unimportant detail, some small thing would come into my mind. Some scene would well up in my memory, then some other scene related to it, then some third scene with no connection to the other two. Memories surged along like waves, and I swam among them. And the wave that was included in every other wave, and illumined the whole series of waves—Sabirah—I had come so close to Sabirah in those last days. And when I went to bring her to Rupnagar. My first and last journey with her. We left Vyaspur before dawn, but when the lorry reached Bulandshahr it was already afternoon. And when our horse-cart passed by the bazaar, on the way to the other bus-stand where the lorries left for Rupnagar, Sugar-sellers’ Lane was so full of smoke and wasps that I felt suffocated. The neighborhoods of this city are known by their atmospheres. The atmosphere here was so different from that of Vyaspur. Smoke, wasps, wrens, dust—wherever the weekly markets were held, how many wrens there were! And the lanes in which huge cauldrons of sugar bubbled on big cooking stoves were so full of smoke and wasps that it was hard to walk through them. If you go on beyond the bazaar, there are gravel roads, covered with dust, level in some places and full of ruts in others. The lorry for Rupnagar left sometime in the late afternoon. As we crossed over the Ganges on the bridge, darkness fell. Somehow, at some point, her hand came into mine. From then on I was unconcerned about the dust and ruts in the road, and about when the lorry would arrive in Rupnagar, and even about whether it would arrive at all.

•

Walking along, I started. “Afzal, you? What are you doing here?”

“Sympathizing with friends.”

I turned around, and looked in all directions. There was no one there at all. There were only trees, with their dry yellow leaves falling.

“What friends?”

“All these trees are my friends. Today they’re in difficulties, it looks as though they’ll be stripped quite naked.” I sat down there on the grass with Afzal, then inspected the surroundings.

“Yar, the season has completely changed. When we came, the rains were just ending. The winter was about to begin, and what a cold winter, my God!”

“Yes, Pakistan has seen one season pass. Now another season is passing over her. And this season is crueler, the trees are being stripped.”

“Afzal,” I asked casually, “aren’t there any neem trees here?”

“Why not? Come on, I’ll show you.”

He took me around the park. Then he brought me beneath a tree and stopped me: “Here’s your neem.”

I looked at it closely. “Yar, this is a Persian lilac.”

He was a little embarrassed. “Well, it doesn’t matter, there’s nothing wrong with the Persian lilac. He too is a friend of mine. There’s a neem here, I’ll have to search for it.”

“But we never had to search for neem trees! In the afternoons when the desert wind blew, and in the rainy July days, their greenness always proclaimed their presence.”

Afzal stayed silent. He went over to a leafy banyan tree, and announced his intention of camping there. “Sit down and rest a little. This is the coolest spot in Pakistan.”

“Is it?” I laughed.

“Yes,” Afzal said seriously, “In fact the banyan is my closest friend. The neem is an effeminate tree, its branches are only good for hanging swings on. Or for old ladies who sit in its shade and spin. But the bliss of Nirvana can be found only in the shade of the banyan.”

To say anything against the banyan just then would have been the height of ingratitude. Its shade was thick and cool. The grass spread out beneath it, all green and soft. I took off my shoes and put them to one side, unbuttoned my collar, stretched out on my back, and closed my eyes. I was remembering my lost trees. Lost trees, lost birds, lost faces. The swing suspended from the thick branch of the neem, Sabirah, the long swings back

and forth, “Ripe neem seed, when will spring come?”—damp hair fallen forward on cheeks wet with raindrops. “Long live my brother, he’ll send a palanquin for me!” From a distant tree, the voice of the koyal bird.

I finally discovered the neem tree; and I had already heard the voice of the koyal. Oh, when I heard the koyal for the very first time in this land! I thought, “Where is my friend’s voice coming from?”* It happened when we had left Shamnagar and settled into a rented house. No houses in that area had been abandoned, so there were no new Emigrants among the neighbors. It was an open area. Nearby there were a good number of trees to be seen, and from hearing the koyal’s voice I suspected that there must be mango and jamun trees among them.

When Ammi heard the koyal’s voice, she was extraordinarily moved: “*Ai hai*! The koyal is calling.” Then she fell absolutely silent, with her ears alert for the koyal’s voice. And then I saw that her eyes were wet.

For me the koyal’s voice became a kind of license from the Rehabilitation Department, for after hearing it I gradually came to feel comfortable in this city. But the voice had a different effect on Ammi. It awakened sleeping memories. And to top it all off, Auntie Sharifan suddenly descended upon us.

“*Ai* Auntie Sharifan! When did you arrive?” And Ammi rose and impulsively embraced her.

“Dulhan Bi, I came a month ago. I wanted so much to see you! I asked your whereabouts until I reached the house in Shamnagar. Munshi Musayyab Husain told me you’d left there.” As she spoke, she took in the house in a single glance: “Dulhan Bi, I’ve just come from Munshi Musayyab Husain’s house. It’s a real mansion! While they’ve allotted you this house no bigger than the palm of your hand!”

“Do you think we had it allotted? We’re having to live in a rented house!”

“In a rented house? Dulhan Bi! Come to your senses! Worthless wretches who had no homes have had mansions allotted to them, those who had mansions have to live in rented houses!” Then in a changed voice she said, “Dulhan Bi, don’t take it amiss, but your Pakistan is topsy-turvy. Everybody’s lost all fellow feeling, it’s hard to believe it.” Then in a moment she directed her attention to me: “Dulhan Bi, this is Zakir? *Ai hai*, I didn’t even recognize him!” She rose and made the gesture of taking my misfortunes onto herself. “Son, don’t you recognize me? I used to wash

your diapers! And when you had typhoid, Bi Amma and I sat up night after night by your bedside. Dulhan Bi, do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember. It was a miracle that he lived through it."

"Bi Amma never stopped praying. She was on her prayer-carpet night and day. So, son, what are you doing?"

"Auntie Sharifan, your Zakir is a Professor in the College."

"Thanks to God's grace! May the Lord bless you." Then she said hesitantly, "Dulhan Bi, when I saw Musayyab Husain's son, I couldn't believe it. There, he used to loaf around in the street. Here, the worthless wretch has been earning money hand over fist!"

"Here, everyone who can earn, earns money hand over fist."

"Son!" Auntie Sharifan again addressed me. "In Pakistan people have all kinds of big jobs. Why are you wasting your time teaching those useless boys?"

Ammi didn't encourage Auntie Sharifan to pursue the matter. She changed the subject completely. "Auntie Sharifan, tell us something of how things are back there."

"How things are back there?" Auntie Sharifan sighed. "You want to know how things are back there. Who's there at all any more? The Big Mansion is full of refugees. Khan Sahib's house is locked up. The Small Mansion is a complete ruin. Last summer, when the dust storms came, one of its walls fell in. Since then, inside and outside are all one. Poor Turab Ali, whose house was so crowded and bustling, has stayed on in it all by himself. His whole family has come here, and he's completely alone there."

"By now he must be quite old?"

"Like a dried-up stick. He lies on a cot in the empty house, coughing."

Sharifan sighed. "There was a time when families were expanding, and even big houses began to seem small. Now this time has come, when all the families are scattered. Now even small houses seem big. Just think about your house back there! But now who's left? Batul Bi and her younger daughter, two people and such a big house."

"So Tahirah has gone?"

"Yes, her husband came last month from Dhaka and took her away. Now she's sending letter after letter saying 'You come too.'"

"Is something being arranged for Sabirah?"

"Requests have come from a number of places, and I told Batul Bi, 'Look, whatever boy you can get, marry her off to him and be done with it.

It’s not as though there are that many boys around, for you to worry about whether the match is good or bad! The boys have all gone off to Pakistan.’”

“Then?”

“Dulhan Bi, it was my duty to give advice, and I gave it. Beyond that, people follow their own notions of what’s good for them.” Then she said in a low voice, “I’ve heard that Sabirah has refused.”

“Sabirah has refused?” Ammi said with surprise. “She wasn’t that kind of a girl.”

“She says she’ll get a job. When I heard that I beat my breast—that the daughter of a family of Maulvis should go and work in offices!”

“Oh.” Ammi looked pensive.

Some of this talk of Sabirah I heard, some of it I didn’t hear. As Auntie Sharifan embarked on this topic, her raised voice had grown softer and softer, until it assumed the form of a whisper. And just then Irfan arrived, and knocked at the door.

“What’s the matter, aren’t you going to the Shiraz today?”

“Why not? Of course I’m going. Let’s go.” And I immediately set out with Irfan for the Shiraz.

Perhaps with me also, things left behind were slipping further away. But the things all around absorbed me more and more. This city with its bustling restaurants, leafy trees, and well-developed girls was becoming a part of me, and moreover its shape was changing before my eyes. Those lanes with collapsed, burned-out houses testifying to the terrible events that had happened there, were now fragrant with new houses and new residents, and the streets were full of a new hustle and bustle. The shopkeepers sitting in the abandoned shops no longer looked uprooted, the way they had before. Now they looked as though they’d been sitting there forever. The old and new parts and elements of the bazaar had already blended together. Shops, shopkeepers, goods and merchandise in the shops, customers who came and went, passersby strolling along, all had merged to form a whole.

I had started out in this city as a wanderer, and had made the Shiraz my camp. Friends came by various roads and with various excuses, and gathered in this camp. One friend’s whole family had been forced to live in one room, or one verandah, of an abandoned house. When the crowded atmosphere oppressed his nerves, he wandered through the wide spaces of the city. In his wanderings some auspicious moment brought him to the Shiraz, and from then on he belonged there. Another friend had been

allotted a big house; fearful of its expanses, he left it, and roamed through the city. In the course of his roaming he discovered the Shiraz. Another friend had lived comfortably and securely here in his own ancestral home since long before Partition. But in this new atmosphere of houselessness and homelessness, his heart was alienated from his ancestral home and he chose to be homeless, he came and camped in the Shiraz.

In those days when the whole population seemed to be homeless, we knew we had a home—as if we had been sitting in the Shiraz through many births, like faithful priests sitting smeared with ashes, and would sit there for many births to come. As claims were approved and houses were given to the homeless and work to the unemployed, we Shiraz-dwellers began to look unsettled, as though we were the only ones in the city without a house. It was in those days, when we were going through all this, that Afzal became a restless spirit and a lover of alcohol, and the acid etched its way into Irfan's voice. In those days Salamat and Ajmal had not yet known the taste of drinking and revolution. They were still only "intellectuals," and sat in the Shiraz arguing merely about literature and art; but the one who made the greatest name for himself in these intellectual discussions was Zavvar.

Zavvar was the youngest of us all, but he established himself among us as a learned scholar, and his brilliance and maturity of mind fully made up for his youthfully downy cheeks. At such an early age, after reading books of all types and descriptions, he announced that wisdom doesn't come from books, but from passing through the experiences of life. Thus, in search of wisdom, he sat for a few days with Afzal, trying out liquor. Then, believing it inadequate, he tried marijuana, hashish, and opium. Taking baths, changing clothes, and shaving he considered to be a waste of time, and insofar as possible he avoided such extravagances. Partly because his shoes were rather old, and partly because they were unpolished and covered with dust and dirt, they looked ancient. He himself took out and threw away their inner soles, and contrived to leave the nails protruding. He used to walk for miles, and come back to the Shiraz with his heels covered with blood.

"Yar, why don't you get a shoemaker to fix your shoes?"

"No."

"Why?"

"To become a man, one ought to have the experience of torment; and great art is born only through suffering."

Thus, always looking for new experiences of torment, he took the Civil Service exam and passed it.

“Zavvar! So now you’re going to become an officer in the Civil Service.”

“I, a Civil Service officer! I take refuge in God against such a horror!”

“After all, you took the test of your own free will, and passed it.”

“A man ought to pass through that experience too.”

“A new experience of torment!” Irfan laughed his sarcastic laugh.

Now it was late at night, and we were walking silently along Mall Road, absorbed in our situation.

“Yar, do you know what time it is?”

These words displeased Zavvar. “Even if we find out, what difference will it make?”

“I mean,” I said, “at some point a man ought to sleep, too.”

“Provided he has a place to sleep,” Irfan put in.

These words too displeased Zavvar. “Irfan, you stay awake out of necessity. For me staying awake isn’t a necessity, it’s a choice.”

“Staying awake, and taking the Civil Service exam,” Irfan said with a sarcastic smile.

Zavvar’s face grew red. I at once turned toward Salamat. “Salamat, you have a fine big house. Why do you wander around in the streets with us?”

“That house isn’t mine, it belongs to some Sikh.”

“But the Sikhs have gone.”

“That makes no difference. My father has taken their place.”

Ajmal suddenly remembered that Afzal’s house was nearby. “Yar, if you really need a place to sleep, Afzal’s house is right nearby.”

“Come on, let’s go wake him up.”

We went a little way, then turned and entered a lane, then knocked at a door. The door opened, Afzal came out and scrutinized us. “Mice! Why have you come at this hour?”

“To sleep,” I said.

“But I don’t have any extra cots.”

“We’re from the pre-cot era.”

“But I don’t even have any extra bedding.”

“You have a bare floor?”

“Yes, that I have, though even that’s a bit chewed up.”

We entered the room. A rickety cot, with dirty worn-out bedding, and a massive book lying at one end. In one corner, a mat spread on the floor,

with books scattered all over it.

I picked up the heavy book from the bed. “What’s this?”

“It’s the complete works of Nazir, and it’s my pillow.”

“You still need a pillow when you sleep,” Zavvar said.

“Well, it’s like this: awake or asleep, I want to keep my head high.”

Stretching out on the mat, I ran my eye over the whole room. “Yar, the room’s not bad.” I was seeing Afzal’s place for the first time.

“This one room’s still good, but the whole rest of the house has been ruined, and in fact the whole neighborhood. When I came here the lanes were clean and the houses spotless. Now the lanes are filthy and the houses soiled.”

“In my opinion,” Salamat said, “a Muslim can’t tolerate very much cleanliness.”

“This house was quite large,” Afzal told us, “and all furnished and equipped. The mice seized all the furniture. They left me as my total share this image of Lord Krishan.”

“Afzal, they did you a favor,” Zavvar said.

“Really?” Afzal looked at Zavvar with innocent wonder.

“After all, what would you have done with furniture? They’ve left you the really important thing.”

“You’re exactly right. This is just what I thought myself. Yar, they’re good people. They left the good thing for me. It’s the reason that this room is clean, while the whole rest of the house is soiled.”

Stretched out on the mat, I was turning over the books. “Afzal, you were sleeping; you’re a big bore.”

“No.”

“Then what were you doing?”

“I was conversing with the image.”

“But we’ve come to sleep,” Ajmal said.

“Don’t sleep.”

“Why not?”

“If you go to sleep, when you wake up you’ll see that you’ve turned into mice.”

“You’re quite right.” Zavvar, who had sat down on the cot, stood up. “Come on, yar.”

Taking Afzal with us, we went out. “Yar, where are we going?” I asked, as we walked down a long road.

“It’s a very meaningless question,” Zavvar said. “Don’t ask where and why. The real point is that we’re going.”

“Come on, we’re going to the Imperial!”

The Imperial was the final stopping place in our night journey. The city was still unacquainted with air-conditioning, so the Imperial took great advantage of its expansive courtyard and open-air dance floor. Romantic couples loved to dance there, holding each other elegantly and decorously under the star-filled summer night sky. This decorum was endangered when the night grew late and all the lights suddenly went out and Miss Dolly’s appearance was announced. Then there was darkness all around, with only a spotlight on Miss Dolly. But Miss Dolly herself, wearing only the most nominal costume, was like a flash of lightning in the darkness. There was one other living creature who could sometimes be seen with Miss Dolly in this circle of light: a tawny cat. But a waiter always came swiftly from the back, and either picked up the tawny cat or chased her away.

This tawny cat was the manager’s darling; she habitually lay tucked under his chair. She contented herself with whatever she got from his table; she was never seen prowling over toward any of the other tables. But when it was time for the cabaret, she yawned and arose and went over to the dance floor, sometimes right near Miss Dolly. A waiter coaxed her away and brought her back, and she came without a fuss and sat down again by the manager’s chair, or tucked herself underneath it. Dolly and Tawny were the Imperial’s two chief characters.

That evening at the Shiraz is enshrined in my memory, set apart from all other evenings. When the Shiraz, despite being full, was silent, and there was a sign in the middle of the room, “Please refrain from political conversation.” Even the night before, the Shiraz had been noisy, for at every table and in every group there had been only one topic of conversation: the coming elections. The discussants had been loudly and energetically predicting the downfall of Sikandar Mirza. But today the whole discussion had been suspended. The people sitting in the room were only drinking tea. They exchanged a few words among themselves, but in whispers.

“Yar, the tea was cold,” Zavvar said disgustedly, as he drank the last sip.

“Yes, yar, it was no good, let’s order more.” With these words Salamat called out, “Abdul!”

Fresh tea came and it was hot, but even then they didn’t like it. That time it was Irfan who announced his displeasure: “Yar, what’s happened to the

Shiraz's tea?"

Gradually all the friends began to suffer from the feeling that something had happened to the Shiraz's tea. Then they passed beyond this feeling and began to think that something had happened to the Shiraz itself.

"Yar, the Shiraz is deserted now."

"Yes, yar, how noisy it used to be!"

"Where has everybody gone?"

"Not everyone is as idle as we are."

Salamat glared at Zavvar. "Meaning?"

"What I mean," Zavvar said, "is that we waste a lot of time in the Shiraz."

"Where else should we waste it?" Afzal said promptly.

"Do we have to waste it?"

Afzal looked angrily at Zavvar. "Mouse! Time can't be carefully preserved. Time is wasted no matter what."

In fact we had now begun to feel uprooted in the Shiraz. We tried very hard to stick to the place. Forgetting all our differences, we talked sometimes about literature, especially modern literature, and sometimes about abstract art, but somehow or other someone would wander off the topic and end up in forbidden territory. The conversation shifted from literature to the situation. But very soon someone would look with a start at the neighboring table, and fall silent. The man at the next table was looking elsewhere, but listening to us. It seemed as if his ear were right in our midst. Ears loomed larger and larger in our imaginations, they came and pressed themselves against our lips; we fell silent.

Finally we were uprooted from the Shiraz, and uprooted in such a way that our group was broken up. Only Irfan and I were left, having emigrated from the Shiraz, sitting in the Imperial. But now the Imperial didn't seem so lively either. No white faces, no young couples dancing together, no chinking and rattling of cups and plates, no waiters bustling efficiently back and forth. Many of the tables remained empty. One or two tables were filled. On the open-air dance floor, some middle-aged Anglo-Pakistani couples wearily danced. The band too played in a tired-out way. The tawny cat sat next to the manager's chair, with her eyes closed. Only rarely did she rise and go onto the dance floor, and meekly say "Meow," and voluntarily turn back. Why should she stay on the dance floor? Miss Dolly's cabaret no

longer took place. Some high-spirited admirer had whisked her away. When she went, the Imperial's vitality went with her.

"After today I won't be coming here."

"Why?"

"I've gotten a job on the newspaper, and I have night duty."

I looked at Irfan with surprise. "You're going to work?"

"I'll have to." He sighed.

"All right, so you won't come here tomorrow." I fell into thought. "Why should I come here either, all by myself—"

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Tasnim! She left me and went away. She was preparing to do an M.A. in History. She first came to me bearing a letter of recommendation, and asked my help in her preparation. She appeared regularly, sat with her notebook open, jotted down notes with great earnestness, and left. She wouldn't by any means start any casual conversation. Not that I wanted to chat with her, anyway. She seemed a very plain, colorless girl. Why would I chat with her? But that day she appealed to me. It was morning. I had just had a bath and changed my clothes before leaving home, and she too looked shining clean. In that full bus, after making myself a place to stand among the ladies' seats, I saw that she was standing in front of me. So close that her white neck and pink earlobes were within the reach of my breath. I found myself breathing a little faster.

When she got down from the bus, I got down too. It took me a little while to force my way through the crowd and get to the door. In this small amount of time, she vanished. Well, it didn't matter. I thought she'd be coming to study that evening, but that evening she didn't come. Well, tomorrow evening for sure, I consoled myself. But she didn't come that evening either. Her not coming made me even more eager.

The next day I phoned her and, as her teacher, asked why she hadn't come. She gave some meaningless answer, and hesitantly said, "I'll come today."

That day passed with the weight of a mountain, as I waited for the evening. But finally the evening came, and she too came. When she came, she sat down in silence. The concentration with which she used to ask questions and jot down notes was no longer in evidence. Today my heart

wasn’t in the teaching, either. I wrapped up the lesson quickly. Then she was silent, and I was silent.

“Tasnim!” I finally opened my mouth.

In response, she lifted her eyes to me, but I didn’t know what I’d wanted to say to her. I was lost, dissolved, as though I didn’t exist at all.

Finally she rose. I too rose, confused and flustered. I escorted her to the door. As I was leaving the room I said softly, “Tasnim!”

She paused, but I was struck dumb. Then with the speed of lightning she left the room. I was left standing there.

She didn’t come again.

•

Tasnim had gone. My evening’s occupation was over. Empty inside, indifferent outside, I wander in the city. For no reason my footsteps turn toward the Shiraz. Abdul is astonished. “Zakir Sahib! Where have you been?”

“Right here. Where are the others?”

“Nobody has been coming. Shall I bring tea?”

“Yes, bring it.”

I’m sitting alone in a corner, drinking tea. Around me all the faces are new and strange. Oh, so the white-haired man still keeps coming. He’s a man of fixed principles. But where are my friends? How strange it is. In the Shiraz we were once the main group. Now we’re gone as completely as though we’d never been here at all.

Afzal suddenly enters. “Yar, where is everybody? I’ve worn myself out looking for you. I didn’t find a single mouse. I’d heard that you and Irfan had taken to sitting in the Imperial.”

“We used to.”

“Anyway, I went there with the idea that I’d find you there. Yar, that place is in terrible shape. The cabaret show was going on, the lights were out. Well, I sat down. I said to myself that when the lights came on I’d search out those mice. When I look at the floor, no Miss Dolly. A disgusting woman was dancing. The people who praised her sounded just as disgusting. When the lights came on and I looked around, it was all boorish rustic types. I cursed you both and came away.”

Afzal was telling the truth. This was the Imperial's new style. I too had gone there one evening. When I saw how things were, I left again.

"Yar, where have the good people gone?" As he spoke, Afzal was looking all around. He muttered, "Who are these people? Where has everybody gone?"

"Zavvar has joined the Civil Service and left the city."

"He can go jump in the lake. Tell me about the others."

"Salamat might go off to America, he's running around trying to get a scholarship. You can usually find him in the U.S.I.S. Ajmal has been swallowed up by his Basic Democracy job."

"And Irfan?"

"He's got a job with a newspaper."

"Mouse!" Afzal grumbled, "What are *you* doing?"

"Love."

"Love?" Afzal looked me over judiciously from head to foot. "Well, you're a good man."

"Sitting in the Shiraz chewing over literature and art and politics isn't everything."

Afzal listened gravely to my words. "You're right. Love is a bigger task than that. But, fellow, to make love, a man ought to be virtuous."

"Yar, you're certainly virtuous yourself."

"Yes, I'm virtuous, but I'm very much occupied here."

"Occupied?"

"Fellow! Don't you know how much of my time is spent in the company of birds and trees? I don't have time for love. You make love, I'll pray for you."

"Yar, what good will prayer do me now? She was here, but now she's gone away." I heaved a long sigh.

Afzal regarded me very sympathetically, and advised me, "Fellow! Keep the door open, and stay awake."

The door that had been closed for so long, she opened as she left. Now I couldn't close it. The door stayed open, and I kept waiting. She didn't come, someone else came. I ran into Anisah at a music conference. I was surprised to see her: "What, you! When did you get back from London?"

In fact, what surprised me wasn't that she had suddenly come back from London. What surprised me was that she had come back with a new elegance. When I had seen her in the Imperial, I hadn't been struck by her at

all at the time. She had even shown a bit of interest in me, but I didn't give her the smallest chance. How could I have? The door was closed inside me. And furthermore, at that time she wasn't exactly eye-catching. Her figure seemed utterly flat. But now her body was full of curves, and her breasts were very apparent. Her plump, rounded arms were bare, her waist and hips swayed attractively, her full breasts seemed to quiver when she moved. With wonder and joy, I looked her over from head to foot. "Anisah! London has transformed you!"

She accepted my words as a compliment. She laughed, then said, "It's getting on into the night—when will this conference be over?"

"Do we have to wait for it to be over?"

"No, we don't."

We immediately went out. When I opened the car door, she looked at me with surprise. "Why, you've gotten a car! That means I'm not the only one who's changed, you've changed too."

"It's second-hand."

"Second-hand ones run more smoothly." She burst out laughing.

"Shouldn't we go somewhere and have tea?"

"Of course. Why else did we leave the conference? How is the Imperial nowadays? In London I only missed one single thing here—the Imperial."

"The Imperial has changed too. But it's changed differently. When you see it now, you'll be dismayed."

"Then I certainly ought to go and see it."

I turned the car toward the Imperial.

Now the Imperial had gone even further downhill. No cabaret, no band playing. The tables were mostly empty. Here and there a customer or two sat drinking tea, in silence. The tawny cat lay next to the manager's chair, her eyes closed. Then she rose with a kind of lassitude. She yawned, and straightened out her body. Then, moving wearily, she passed under various empty tables until she paused by a customer eating shami kabobs and gave a meek "Meow." But when she saw his indifference she went on. She reached the dirty, dusty dance floor, sat down in the middle of it, and closed her eyes.

Anisah watched this whole scene with sadness. She said, "The Imperial has gone into a total decline. How did it happen? When I left, the Imperial was really at its peak. Who could have imagined then that such a fate would overtake it?"

“That’s the trouble with peaks. Those who are on them never even imagine that they could be brought down from such a height! And when the decline starts, it can’t be stopped halfway. The decline doesn’t stop even for a moment, until it reaches its limit.”

“You’ve started talking about the decline of nations. I was talking about the Imperial.”

“Whenever and wherever decline begins, it works in exactly the same way.”

Anisah gave me a meaningful look. “Meanwhile you seem to have become a real intellectual. Come on, let’s not stay here.”

As we got in the ear, I made a suggestion: “The Lorraine will be open now. We can get good tea there.”

“I don’t mind.”

As we sat in the Lorraine she said mischievously, “So I’ve changed since I’ve been in London?”

I again looked her over from head to foot and was delighted. “You’ve absolutely changed.”

“But I see that you’ve stayed right here and changed.”

“How?”

“Such that now you can talk to a girl, and drink tea with her in a hotel late at night.” She paused, then said, “Since I left, haven’t you made some experiments in love?”

“I haven’t, but I want to.”

“Don’t tell lies. Your behavior shows that you’ve made the attempt. If it didn’t succeed, that’s another matter. It’s not so important. The first attempt usually turns out that way. Have another try, success will crown your efforts.”

“I’m not over-age for it?”

“Nonsense. Over there, in matters of love the real period starts after forty. And the man who has white hair at his temples has the girls swarming around him like flies.”

Involuntarily I ran a finger over the hair at my temples. “When will that fashion arrive here?”

“It’s already arrived. Enter the field. Start an affair with some girl soon. Tell me, who will you start with?”

“Why shouldn’t I start with you.”

“With me!” She looked at me with some surprise and then laughed indifferently. “You really have got nerve!”

“Still, what’s the harm?”

“No harm,” she said composedly. “But I’m a difficult girl. You won’t be able to keep up with me.” She thought, then said, “Listen! If you were fixed up with Raziyah, how would that be?”

“I don’t care for her.”

“Then who do you care for?”

“You.”

“I see!” She smiled. “You really are filled with manly courage! That’s a fine thing.”

En route from the Lorraine to her house, I made a further display of manly courage. While driving, I took one hand away from the wheel and put it on her bare arm. She neither praised me for this manly courage, nor did anything to dampen my enthusiasm. My hand slid along her arm and reached her shoulder. Traversing her shoulder, it began to move toward her breast; then she instructed me, “No further.”

“Why?”

“You can’t expect reasons for everything. I’ve told you, and that’s enough.”

“But I want to.” As I spoke, I pulled the car a little off the road and braked to a stop. It was very late at night, and the road was empty from one end to the other. I slid over near Anisah, so near that I could feel with my body the warmth and softness of her hips. I slowly ran my hand over her hair, my fingers came along with her loose curls and slid down to her soft shoulders, from her shoulders to her smooth arms. Then I slowly and gently put my hand on her swelling breast. She lifted her eyes and looked at me seriously. “What did I tell you?”

My hand stayed in place, amidst the warmth and softness. She went on looking at me. She had given an order, and was waiting for it to be carried out. I slowly removed my hand. But we went on staring at each other. I slid nearer to her. My lips moved toward her moist lips.

In a tone of finality she said, “No.”

“Why?”

“I’m a difficult girl. You’re a simple type.”

“I’m not simple any longer.”

“Oh?” She looked at me archly.

“No.”

She suddenly laughed, the way people laugh at the innocent words of a child. “All right, let’s go, it’s very late. I have to get some sleep.”

At her house, as she got out of the car she said, “Come on, I’ll make you some coffee.”

“It’s surely not polite to disturb your family so late at night.”

“No, my room is off by itself. I can make coffee right in my room.”

“But why should you go to all that trouble so late at night? I don’t want to bore you.”

She smiled and said, “All right, good night!”

“Good night,” I said, and started the car.

After I had gone some distance, I hesitated. Why had she detained me? I braked to a stop in the middle of the road, and fell into thought. Then I swiftly started the car, turned around, and headed back at full speed toward her house.

I pulled my car into the driveway. I stopped, and examined the room which Anisah had said was hers, and which was indeed off by itself. And she had also told me that she stayed up till late at night, reading. But her room was submerged in darkness. Not the slightest ray of light showed through any window, any pane. I turned the car around, feeling very downcast, and went back.

•

“Oh!” As I was walking along, I came to a stop. The Imperial lay in utter ruin. The whole structure had collapsed. The dance floor was deeply buried in dirt.

I stood there staring. I had to go on, but my feet wouldn’t move. I turned back instead. As I turned back, my eye fell on the tawny cat. It was dusk, and she was wandering around near the dirt-covered dance floor like a shadow. How dirty and scrawny she looked!

“Mice! Are you back again?” Afzal saw the group together again, and was astonished.

“We didn’t go anywhere,” Salamat and Ajmal said together.

“Salamat!” Afzal addressed himself to Salamat: “That scholarship you were going to get for America, what happened to it? I thought you’d be there by now.”

“America!” Salamat said scornfully. “You know I’m anti-American! They offered me the scholarship, but I rejected it.”

Irfan, watching Salamat, smiled without saying a word.

“Mouse! Why are you laughing?”

“It’s nothing. I won’t say a word.” Irfan brought his smile under control, and assumed a grave expression. Salamat looked at him angrily, but remained silent.

“And you, Ajmal?”

“Me?” Ajmal announced with extreme seriousness, “I couldn’t reconcile myself with the Ayub dictatorship. I quit.”

“Or were thrown out?” Afzal again looked meaningfully at Irfan.

“My lips are sealed,” Irfan said, with a small smile.

Irfan too had begun to be seen again in the Shiraz. After slaving away all day and all night on the newspaper, he had eventually found ways to wrap up his work and escape from the office.

One by one all my friends came back, but the vanished days never came back.

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FIVE

THE CITY was now under the spell of a new slogan. The grip of the old slogans had loosened, although the posters promoting them were still up; in the same way all insults, all accusations, were written on the walls. No amount of sun or rain had done them any harm. Still, their mood, their language had gone stale. Looking at the walls, he was surprised at how quickly slogans went stale. A new slogan came like a whirlwind, and spread rapidly over walls, cars, blackboards. “Crush India,” “Crush India,” in every house one subject, in every gathering one topic—war, war, war. One single question followed him around, in and out of the house, everywhere: will there be war?

“Maulana Sahib! A letter has come from my Karamat. Nowadays he’s posted in Dhaka.”

“What does he write? He’s well, isn’t he?”

“He’s all right, but it seems from his letter that he’s somewhat worried.”

“Nowadays, who isn’t?”

“Yes, that’s true, conditions are getting worse and worse with every passing day.” Khvajah Sahib then addressed him: “Isn’t it so, Zakir my son?”

“Yes sir, conditions are not at all good.”

“What’s the news?”

“News? There’s no special news.”

“Maulana Sahib!” Khvajah Sahib addressed Abba Jan. “What’s come over our sons? They wander around so much, but if you ask them for the news, they say there’s no news! When I ask Salamat, he always tells me the same news: that the revolution is coming. I said to him, ‘Son, revolution isn’t coming, war is coming.’ He answered, ‘Yes, and revolution is coming

with it.’ I said, ‘Wretch, don’t you see what’s happening in East Pakistan?’ And what answer does he give me? ‘East Pakistan is being liberated.’ I said, ‘Get out of my house, bastard son!’”

“May God have mercy upon us,” Abba Jan said briefly, and put the mouthpiece of the huqqah in his mouth.

“Yes, may God have mercy, conditions are very bad. Why, just this morning, when I had offered my prayers and was coming back, I saw army cars heading toward the border-crossing point at Wagah. There were a lot of them.” He paused, then addressed Zakir: “Son, what do you think, will there be war?”

“What do you think?” He sent the question back to him.

When the question came his way, Khvajah Sahib sent it over toward Abba Jan. “Maulana Sahib, please answer your son’s question.”

Abba Jan continued to smoke his huqqah in silence. But Khvajah Sahib kept looking at him. Finally he took the mouthpiece out of his mouth, slid the huqqah toward Khvajah Sahib, and addressed Zakir: “Son, you’re the one who understands political affairs. I only know one thing: I tell you that when the masters are cruel and the sons are rebellious, any disaster at all can befall the Lord’s creatures.”

“When the masters are cruel—” he hesitated, “when the masters are cruel, and the people lick the dust.” Abba Jan’s long-forgotten words echoed in his mind.

“You’re entirely right.” Khvajah Sahib’s head was bowed.

Seeing that both his elders were silent, he gratefully seized the opportunity and slipped away.

At Nazira’s shop too, this was the topic of conversation. Handing him a pack of cigarettes, Nazira asked, “Zakir Sahib, sir! What do you think, will there be war?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know, sir, but people are saying.”

Karim Bakhsh, who had planted himself on a stool nearby, announced confidently, “War, sir, is bound to take place.”

“Karim Bakhsh! How do you know?”

“I offer the dawn prayer, do you?”

“No.”

“Offer it, then you’ll know. In the evening, you can’t tell anything from the sky, there’s too much noise. At that time it’s mute. Get up at dawn and

see, at that hour the sky speaks. Lately a comet has appeared."

"Yar, I've heard that, but I didn't believe it."

"Get up at dawn and look at the sky, you'll believe it. The tail is just like a broom."

"Yar, may the broom not make a clean sweep of us!"

He had scarcely set foot in the Shiraz and exchanged greetings with Irfan, who was already sitting there, when Salamat entered with his platoon. Now Salamat had with him not only Ajmal, but a whole group. And now, in view of his position of leadership, he spoke more haughtily.

"Reactionaries!" Salamat stared intently first at him, then at Irfan. "What do you think? Will there be war, or not?"

"Oh, if only war depended on my opinion!" Irfan's voice was sarcastic.

Salamat's face at once tensed. "Irfan! The time for your refined humor and delicate sarcasm is already over. Today you'll have to give a straight answer: either you want war, or you don't want it. You'll be forced to make a commitment."

"Commitment!" Irfan gave a poisonous smile. "Salamat, you've come to the wrong place. My commitment can neither stop the war, nor start it."

"Still the same worn-out, rusty, boring, conventional technique for avoiding the question of the times." Salamat looked contemptuously at Irfan, and turned his attention to him. "And you, Zakir? What do you say?"

"Me? What can I say?"

"Are you for the war, or against the war?"

He fell into thought. "I don't know, yar." He paused, then said, "I don't really know what I'm for and what I'm against today."

Ajmal stared at him. "This person wants to confuse us."

Someone else in the platoon said, "When the situation confronting them becomes concrete and demands commitment, the reactionaries get rattled."

Salamat rolled up his sleeves, and looked wrathfully all around. He was preparing for a regular speech. "Creating confusion is an old imperialist trick. Today all the imperialist agents are doing it." Then he ground his teeth and pounded his fist on the table. "Imperialist devil, your tricks won't work any longer! You want to save yourselves by creating a confederation with India, you want to suppress the voice of the poor. These tricks won't work. There will be no confederation with India. There will be war!" This Salamat said so loudly that everyone sitting in the Shiraz could hear it. They heard, and looked at him and Irfan as though they had been caught planning some

giant conspiracy against Pakistan. Salamat cast a glance of satisfaction around the room, and began again. “There will be war, and this worn-out system which sustains you will be torn to pieces. Not one of those stale, rotten moral values you carry around with you, that spread a stink in the society, will survive. My babbling fool of a father asked me what then would survive. I said, ‘Old fool! I will survive—I, the revolution!’”

Afzal had come in at some point, and was sitting in silence, staring at Salamat. When the speech was over, he opened his mouth: “Mouse, your opinions raise such a poisonous stink that from now on I’ll have to wear a gas mask to come to the Shiraz.”

Salamat gave Afzal a furious look. Once more he pounded his fist on the table, and yelled, “Reactionaries! Imperialist stooges! Boot-lickers of the capitalists! Your day of reckoning has come.”

“Fellow, lower your voice. The man is the size of a sparrow, and such a loud voice comes out of him!”

Afzal’s way of addressing him rattled Salamat, for it was a powerful blow to his position of leadership. Staring at Afzal, eyes burning with rage, Salamat suddenly rose. “You devil, your conspiracy against the people won’t succeed!”

“It won’t succeed, it won’t succeed!” The whole platoon began to shout the slogan; still shouting it, they left the Shiraz.

As soon as the platoon left, there was silence all around; the three sat for some time in silence. Then Afzal grumbled, “Yar, these revolutionaries will ruin us. And how much that mouse talks!”

“This is the time for people like him to speak,” Irfan said.

“When shoelaces speak, and those who can speak fall silent.” He was startled. What long-ago words had come to his mind! Nowadays this kind of thing was happening to him. Some forgotten saying of Abba Jan’s, some remark of Bi Amma’s, would suddenly come into his mind and at once slide away again—the way a snake would raise its head from the grass, then vanish again in an instant.

“Fellow! In times like this such things happen,” Afzal said. “Throats become strong, and minds grow weak. When I hear that disgusting man’s voice, it’s as though a huge truck horn had been attached to a scooter. When I look at his head, he seems like one of ‘Shah Dulah’s mice.’* I’ve often thought that I should touch his head and see, but it would nauseate me, it would be like touching something slimy and revolting. I draw back my

hand.” He paused, then murmured, “Mouse, you’re not saying anything.” Then he said thoughtfully, almost with fear, “Yar, sometimes when I walk along it seems to me that I’m the only man who’s walking, all the rest are crawling on all fours. And a sound comes, as though someone is gnawing something.” He fell silent. He sat silently, deeply immersed in thought. Then he said, “Yar! Do something about it.”

“Afzal, you’ve had too much to drink.”

“Fellow! Listen carefully to what I say,” Afzal said, holding Irfan’s eyes with his own. Then he slid closer, and said in a low confiding voice, “Pakistan is a trust. You must both become my arms. I’ll safeguard the trust. Otherwise, those mice will gnaw this Pakistan into dust.”

The white-haired man rose from his table, approached, and said, “Afzal Sahib, you’re quite right. Pakistan is a trust.”

Afzal looked steadily at the white-haired man. “White-haired man! Go away at once. I am now imparting instruction to these two virtuous people.”

“All right, all right.” The white-haired man went back to his own table, and busied himself in reading the newspaper.

Afzal stood up.

“What? Are you leaving?”

“Yes, yar! My drunkenness has been spoiled. Now I’ll have to have some more to drink.” He paused, then muttered, “Mice, it seems they’ve all dived into the wine-pitcher, and now they’re standing up on their tails.” He fell silent, thought of something, and went out.

The white-haired man lifted his head from the newspaper, saw that Afzal had gone, and came over. “Well what do you think, will there be war?”

“What do you think?” Irfan said with irritation.

“What do I think?” He fell into thought. “Sir, conditions are very bad.”

“When were they ever good?”

“This too is correct. When were conditions here ever good?”

He fell silent, then muttered, “We’re unlucky people.” He went back to his own table and sat down. Then he called Abdul, paid his bill, and went out.

“He says his hair turned white during Emigration,” Irfan laughed.

He looked soberly at Irfan. “One thing’s for sure. Ever since we’ve seen him, he’s looked exactly like that.”

“And how regularly he comes here.” Irfan laughed a little; he wasn’t ready to be serious about the man.

“He’s been coming here from the earliest days, in just the same style. And in those days his hair was entirely white. We always said that snow had fallen on his head.” Zakir paused, and fell silent as though lost in thought. Then he said, “Yar, some people from those days have absolutely disappeared.” As he spoke, he himself disappeared. What lost, forgotten faces suddenly welled up in his memory! Some so misty that they came before his eyes and then slipped away. Some so clear and bright that they etched themselves on his eyes as though now they’d never leave him. Mulla Binotiya, a small man no bigger than a fist, with a short beard and a compact body. “Well, sir, a small cube of copper saved me.”

“Mulla, how did that happen?”

“When I came away, I left all my property behind me. I only thrust a small cube of copper into my waistband. When the Sikhs attacked, I said to myself, ‘Well, man, today is the test of your skill, and the honor of *binot* is in your hands.’ I took the copper cube out of my waistband, tied it into the corner of a kerchief—and when I whirled it around a single time, I broke their wrists. So, sir, I gave them what was coming to them.”

And Karnaliya, dried up and scrawny, dreadfully talkative, with a tray of *pan* supported against his chest. “Well man, I come from the same place as your Liaqat Ali Khan does. I only lack his degree of ripeness. It’s the special nature of Karnal people. If they get completely fired up, they’re Prime Ministers; if they’re a degree short of that heat, they make shoes or sell *pan*.”

And Nuru the bread-seller, who boasted of being a pure-bred Ambala man. “Sayyid Sahib, there’s not an Ambali among them! All the bastards are from Sadhora, and they’re only Shaikhs by birth. They’ve added ‘Ambali’ to their names just for prestige. I’m the only one from Ambala! That’s why they can’t meet my eyes. Well, sir, that’s how it is in Pakistan. That tall skinny beanpole from Karsi claims to be the Navab of Nucklow!” They had left their cities, but they carried their cities with them, as a trust, on their shoulders. That’s how it usually is. Even when cities are left behind, they don’t stay behind. They seize on you even more. When the earth slips out from under your feet, that’s when it really surrounds you. The grasp of the earth is no doubt strong, but Maulvi Matchbox? Where did he come from? He never spoke to anyone, or even said a word at all; he was lost in himself and in the empty, half-open matchboxes that were spread around him on a cloth. “Maulvi Matchbox, what are these boxes?” “Sir,

these are towns." "Maulvi Matchbox, they don't even have matches in them, they're all empty." "Sir, the towns are empty now."

He murmured, "People have come from all kinds of places. Like kites with their strings cut, that go flying and come down on a roof somewhere." He fell silent, and stared at Irfan. "Irfan!"

"Yes."

"We've been here a long time."

Irfan looked at him intently. "So?"

"So nothing." After a moment he said, "You laughed off what the white-haired man said. But I was shaken inside. I remembered all the past times. Yar!" He paused, then said, "Now your hair and mine have turned white too." His gaze was fixed on the white hair at Irfan's temples.

"But our hair grew white not during Emigration, but in the sun of Pakistan."

"The sun of Pakistan!" He again felt that he was drowning in memories. "Yar, how much we've walked in the sun in this city! In the summer afternoons, there was nothing but the hot pavement of Mall Road, and our footsteps. Our final stop was always the pipal tree on the far side of the bridge; how dense it was, that tree, and what a cool breeze its shade created. Now that tree isn't even there any more. The bastards have cut it down."

Irfan made no reply to his words. But they began to affect him, as though he too was inclined to travel through past days.

"Irfan, those days were certainly harsh for us, but I think they were good."

"Yes, those were good days."

"The days, and the people too."

"And now?" Irfan stared at him.

"Yes, and now." His voice sounded dead, as if he had just collapsed into ruins.

For a long time they sat in silence, lost in their own thoughts. Then he looked at Irfan. He kept looking, as though he wanted to say something, but hesitated.

"Irfan."

Irfan looked at him, but he was silent.

"What is it?"

"Yar!" He paused, then said somewhat hesitantly, "Yar, was it good that Pakistan was created?"

Irfan looked at him sharply. “Have you, too, been influenced by Salamat?”

“Not by Salamat, by you.”

“How?”

“Once doubt begins, there’s no end to it.”

Irfan made no reply. He looked at Zakir somewhat angrily, and tightened his lips. Zakir sat in silence.

“I know one thing,” Irfan said at last, “In the hands of the wrong people, even right becomes wrong.” And at once he rose.

“Are you going?”

“I’m on duty, after all.” He left immediately.

The Shiraz was very peaceful then. Most of the tables were empty. There was not much noise even from the occupied tables. So he thought he could sit in peace for a little while. He didn’t see any danger in the future; the crisis of Salamat had come and gone.

The manager, sitting at the counter, saw that he was alone. He rose and approached him.

“Zakir Sahib! What do you think, will there be war?” He asked as though it was a secret which he alone would know.

He was at a loss for an answer. “I don’t know what will happen.”

“You’re right! No one knows at all what’s going to happen. Everyone I ask gives the same answer, that no one knows what’s going to happen. But a lot of troop movements are taking place.”

He replied uninterestedly, in monosyllables; then, feeling fed up, he rose and left. As he walked out, he heaved a small sigh of relief.

•

Still the same walls, the same big posters on the walls. His gaze again wandered involuntarily among the posters. Now the evening shadows were lengthening, and the words on the posters were no longer so vivid. But still, as his eyes passed over the posters on the walls, he made some effort to read them. These are posters; what’s the handwriting on the wall? It’s often happened that one thing was written on the walls, while something else turned out to be the handwriting on the wall. But the walls are plastered with posters. People walk along in the spell of posters and slogans, ignorant of the handwriting on the wall. As though they’re oblivious. Do they walk?

Who? Seeing a man pass by him, he hesitated. Several people passed nearby, before him and behind him. He couldn't see their faces clearly, for it was dusk and the streetlight was some distance away. Is it because of the lack of light, or because in the dusk faces usually look strange, or are their faces really like that? Again someone passed by him. But this time either his eyes failed him, or the man walked very fast, for he couldn't see the man's face at all. Then he waited for a man to pass by him, so he could examine his face closely, but no one passed by. Today there are so few people! He was surprised. In the evening Mall Road is normally crowded. What's happened today? And as he was thinking this, two glittering eyes suddenly held his gaze—a cat. Sitting among the trees near the sidewalk, the cat seemed to be staring at him. He passed by her, but she sat still, as though frozen in place. A silent and motionless cat. Her eyes, like sparks, stared at him. A man passed by. He couldn't see the man's face. He watched the man walk. How is this man walking? He had no sooner framed the thought than the man turned off onto another street, and vanished from sight. But after all, how was the man walking? As he passed by me, I couldn't hear the sound of his footsteps. How are people walking today? With wonder he watched the rising and falling feet of a man walking towards him. Now he was watching not people's faces, but their feet. He began trying seriously to watch the legs, the moving feet, of the various people walking near him. We don't pay attention, but how strange people look, moving along on their two legs! Or perhaps they only look that way today. A man is recognized by his walk. Every man, every creature. But they're walking as though they've lost their identities. And I? What if I should be walking the same way? No, he said to himself decisively, and at once began to examine his own walk. I never used to walk like this, he muttered, and tried to correct his walk. He lifted his feet with care, and put them down again with care, but his walk seemed to be getting worse and worse. What's happened to my walk today? He hesitated, then reflected that before today he'd never even paid attention to his walk. We keep on walking, and never pay attention to how we walk. Here I am, walking along. Immediately he was brought up short. When he observed his own non-human walk, the strange thought came to him that it was not he who was walking, but someone else in his place. But who? He fell into perplexity. Gradually he controlled his doubt. He walked in measured paces, and listened to the sound of his footsteps. No, I'm myself all right.

I’m walking here on a paved sidewalk in my city, and this is the sound of my footsteps. But while he was reassuring himself like this, a sudden impression came to him that the sound of his footsteps was gradually drawing away from his footsteps. It’s a strange thing. I’m walking along here, and the sound of my footsteps is coming from over there—from where—? Or perhaps I’m here, and I’m walking somewhere else—? Where—? Where am I walking? On what earth are my footsteps falling? He looked around him in surprise. Everything was silent and desolate. As though the town had emptied, the way a matchbox empties. “Houses and inns and places, all empty.”* No noise, no voice, no sound of footsteps, no nothing, only the sound of gnawing coming from all sides, as though many mice were gnawing something. Terrified, stupefied, from one lane to a second, from the second lane to a third. Walking along one lane, he found the road ahead closed. Now what was to be done? The gate of the mansion was closed. He knocked at the closed gate. “Is anyone there?” His cry echoed through the whole town—is anyone there, is anyone there. As though he had been standing at this closed gate from eternity, calling out “Is anyone there?” A cat standing up on her hind legs opened the door, looked at him intently, and closed the door. The light changed from green to red. He began to cross at the crosswalk, then hesitated. The waiting cars, scooter-cabs, and motorbikes suddenly rushed past him as though a dam in a river had burst.

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SIX

YAR ZAKIR!

I first send you the usual salutations. I'm fine, and I hope everything's well with you too.

You must be wondering at my foolishness: "What a time that wretch chose for writing a letter, what a time for him to send word that he's well, and ask how I am!" I too realize how many years it's been that I haven't written, nor have you. And now, in this unsuitable time, I've suddenly thought of you, and am writing to you. Considering how disorganized the mails are, I'm not even sure that this letter will reach you. But nevertheless I'm writing. And after all, why? I'm about to tell you. First you should know that I've transferred myself once more into a new department. Now I'm with the Radio. One benefit of coming here is that I've pretty well escaped from the boring business of files. Here we deal with people, not with files. Compared to files, it's more difficult work, but never boring.

Yar, since coming here I've met a strange girl. The thought never entered my head that I might run into her. A wheat-colored complexion, delicate features, slender figure, medium height, an honest and sincere manner; I always see her in a white cotton sari. She parts her hair in the middle and wears it in a plain braid, but sometimes a lock comes loose and falls forward over her face. Her behavior is always reserved. She's quiet and melancholy. Yar, her simplicity and sadness together have ravished my heart. You don't have to pause when you read those words. First hear the whole story.

From time to time I have to go to the newsroom. That's where I encountered her. Previously, I'd seen her in passing, around the office. I knew she was an announcer. I'd heard her name too. But I still wasn't especially curious about her. Simplicity at first says nothing to a man, then gradually sadness becomes a spell. She used to quietly come, find out the news from Dhaka, and go away. The news was usually disturbing, but not a

trace of anxiety was permitted to show in her face. It was my guess that she was inwardly very worried by the news. One day I asked her, “Bibi, do you have some relatives in Dhaka?”

“Yes, my mother and sister are there.”

“Are you getting letters?”

“The last letter came two weeks ago. Since then I’ve written two letters. I’ve sent a wire too, but no answer has come.”

“But what will you learn from the news on the radio?”

“At least I can get an idea how things are in the city.”

“Then please come to my office. All the Dhaka newspapers come to my desk.”

After this, she began to come to my office. She came regularly every day, looked through all the Dhaka newspapers, and went away.

“Where are the rest of your family?” I asked one day.

“Some in Karachi, some in Lahore, some in Islamabad.”

“And here?”

“There’s no one here any longer.”

“You’re the only one here?”

“Yes, I’m alone in India.”

One Muslim girl who stayed alone in the whole of India, this seemed a strange thing to me. I know whole families left, and some one person would stay behind. But this person was usually an old man. These old men who stayed on alone were not held back by the thought of their property, but by the thought of their graves. There was no problem about property: people could go to Pakistan and enter a claim, and by entering false claims they could even get a larger property in return for a smaller one. But no one can enter a claim for a grave. In Vyaspur that Hakim-ji from the big house, you remember?—his whole family went off to Pakistan. He stayed in his same place, and continued to take sick people’s pulses. I asked him, “Hakim-ji, you didn’t go to Pakistan?”

“No, young man.”

“And the reason?”

“Young man! You ask for the reason? Have you seen our graveyard?”

“No.”

“Just go sometime and take a look. Each tree is leafier than the next. How could my grave have such shade in Pakistan?”

I laughed inwardly. Yar, you Muslims are wonderful! You're always looking toward the deserts of Arabia, but for your graves you prefer the shade of India. Seeing the old people who had stayed behind here, I realized what great power the grave has in Muslims' culture. But did the thought of graves hold this girl as well? The idea bewildered me. One day I asked her, "Your whole family have gone to Pakistan. You didn't go?"

"No, I didn't go."

"And the reason?"

"It isn't necessary for everything to have a reason."

"It isn't necessary, but anyway?"

"Anyway, if I'd gone to Pakistan, it wouldn't have made any difference. I'd have been alone in Pakistan too."

I looked closely at her face.

"What town are you from?"

"Rupnagar."

"Rupnagar!" I was startled. "Why, you're that Sabirah?" This reaction of mine confused her. But I didn't leave her in confusion long. I hastily asked, "You know Zakir?"

In reply, she looked at me carefully from head to foot. Then she said slowly, "I see, so you're that Surendar Sahib."

After that she became absolutely silent. I too was silent, in confusion. Then she went away. The next day she didn't come. The day after she didn't come either, but now this girl had a new meaning for me. Now for me she wasn't a radio announcer, but an evocation of a lost friend. I went and got hold of her and abandoned formality. "Sabirah! Are you angry with me?"

"For what?"

"No matter what the circumstances, it's necessary to tread carefully around someone else's emotional life."

She made no reply to this, but the next day she came, and examined all the old and new Dhaka newspapers with close attention. And from then on she made a habit of coming at a regular time, going through the Dhaka newspapers, chatting a little, drinking tea, and going away. Once or twice I mentioned your name, but each time she either said nothing or changed the subject. So I'm careful now and I don't mention your name. But I know that when we meet, we aren't just two, for a third man is invisibly present with us. Perhaps she meets me for that third man's sake. The Dhaka newspapers

are secondary now. One day I asked, “Sabirah, don’t you have any plan to get married, or anything?”

“None.”

“And the reason?”

She hesitated, then said with a wan smile, “Look, you’ve stepped out of bounds now.”

“Sorry,” I apologized.

“It’s all right,” she said with the same wan smile, and fell silent.

Zakir, this Sabirah of yours seems less like a girl than like a historical relic! Yar, don’t take it amiss, your history in India has progressed very awkwardly. First your conquerors came—so forcefully and tumultuously that their horses’ hooves made the earth quiver, and the clashing of their swords echoed in the air. Then the political leaders appeared, and thundered out their power. The great Mughal emperors—Babur, Akbar, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb. Then Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Maulana Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and all the others—and after them, your Sabirah. A silent melancholy girl, staying on alone in the whole of India. I don’t know whether your history is unique, or whether the histories of all cultures progress like this. “First the sword and spear—and finally?”* Didn’t your “elder statesman” Iqbal have his gaze fixed on this final stage? This stage too is a part of the destiny of the group. Yes, it was the day of Id. I saw Sabirah coming out of the studio. I was a bit surprised to see her on that day. “What, you? You didn’t take the day off today?”

“No,” came the short reply.

“Then please celebrate Id here, and give me a treat.”

“Of course, come in my office.”

Entering her office, she ordered tea and sent for cake. She was pouring the tea, and I was wondering if any Muslim was actually on duty in an office on the day of Id. Most office workers didn’t even stay in the city for the day. Even the day before, they slipped away from the office early and got their train tickets and went straight to their own town. And girls? Girls celebrated Id even more enthusiastically than men. Drinking tea, I gathered my courage and asked, “Sabirah, you didn’t go to Rupnagar?”

“Rupnagar?” She looked at me with surprise. “Why should I?”

“You people have the custom of not spending Id away, but going home to celebrate Id.”

“Perhaps I’ve already told you my family situation. There are now none of us left in Rupnagar.”

I fell silent. Then, drinking tea, I asked casually, “Don’t you even have any distant relatives there?”

“Even my distant relatives have all gone. Rupnagar is empty.”

“What a strange thing,” I murmured.

“Won’t you have some more tea?” She interrupted me, and without waiting for my answer began pouring tea into my cup. Drinking my tea, I threw in one more question: “Since you came to Delhi, have you never been back to Rupnagar?”

“No.”

“It’s strange. How long has it been?”

“A long time. In the early fifties my brother-in-law’s letter came from Dhaka, saying that he had a job and we should come. In those days I’d just been offered a position by All-India Radio. I left for Delhi. My mother and sister set out for Dhaka. They were the last batch that Rupnagar sent to Pakistan.”

“And you decided to settle in India?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

At this answer, I should have kept quiet, but I ignored her politely sarcastic tone and said, “What I mean is that if you had gone to Pakistan—”

I paused briefly, and she interrupted me in a sharp tone, “Then? Then what would have happened?” And she gave me such a look that I didn’t have the courage to finish my sentence at all. You’ll understand what I wanted to say.

Yar, how strange it is that the same town becomes for one of its inhabitants, who has left the country, more meaningful than before, so that he dreams about it; while for another inhabitant all its meaning disappears, so that even though he’s in the same country, he never feels any desire to see the town again. How meaningful the journey to Pakistan made Rupnagar! And how severely Sabirah was punished for staying in India, that for her Rupnagar became meaningless. I think my fate is the same as Sabirah’s. And sometimes I feel that in my childhood I must have offended some holy man, and he cursed me: “Son, your native land will no longer let you see her.” So the town of Vyaspur doesn’t let me see her. When I go there, the town seems to ask, “Where is the other?” And when I can’t find an answer, she closes her door against me. That constant eagerness I used to

have for the vacation to come, so I could run to Vyaspur—that eagerness is now utterly gone. Last June I went there, after a long time. It was late in the month. The rains hadn't started yet, and the afternoons were at their height. In the middle of the afternoon I began to feel once again my old itch to wander, and I set out. From one lane to another, from the second lane to a third. Yar, every lane asked me, "Where is the other?" I felt that I no longer had any kinship with these lanes, as though all the lanes were angry with me. I passed through Rimjhim's lane too. The doorway looked absolutely desolate. Rimjhim's mother sat alone in the doorway, with her half-naked body and withered youth, spinning. I left those lanes, and set out toward our school. It was the vacation, the school was closed. I passed through the empty verandahs and went toward the field. Suddenly my eye fell on the mango tree by the chapel. I went and sat in its shade. Yar, how much time we used to spend sitting in its shade, throwing bricks at the green mangoes to make them fall! This time too the branches were full of green mangoes. I had an overpowering desire to throw bricks at them and make them fall. But yar, my hands were somehow paralyzed. They didn't move to throw a brick. I sat in silence, watching the green leafy branches laden with green mangoes. Then a green mango fell in front of me with a little thump. What was this? At the time there was no wind blowing, and no flock of parrots perched in the tree. Had our mango tree recognized me? I felt melancholy, and stood up. If the lanes, birds, and trees don't recognize you, you're sad, and if they do recognize you, you feel melancholy. You go around looking for a neem tree (did you ever find one?) and here the neem, tamarind, mango, pipal trees are all present in their places. But when they see me, they turn into strangers. When one tree recognized me, I felt melancholy.

My dear friend, for me there's now nothing but melancholy. You must have earned something since you've gone there. Staying here I haven't earned anything, I've only wasted my life. Yar, the hair at my temples is absolutely white. How is the hair at your temples? I'll tell you one thing more—and this is the saddest thing of all. Yesterday when I was drinking tea with Sabirah, my eyes fell on the part in her hair. How elegantly straight a part she had made. I saw that among the black hairs one hair was shining like silver. So, my friend, time is passing. We're all in the power of time. So hurry and come here. Come and see the city of Delhi, and the realm of beauty, for both are waiting for you. Come and join them, before silver fills

the part in her hair, and your head becomes a drift of snow, and our lives are merely a story. That's all,

Surendar

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"And before—" he murmured, then read parts of the letter again and was plunged into thought.

I ought to write a letter, he murmured, after a long time deep in thought. A letter—now, after so much time—now, after so much time, it seemed improper to write her a letter. It's astonishing—since coming here I haven't even written her a letter. Then she gradually slipped out of my mind altogether. And look at her, she didn't lift a finger either. She kept silent, as though she didn't exist, or as though I didn't exist. And now it's suddenly revealed that she exists, and I do too. First she came to life in my memory. And now a lost friend appears, and announces that she exists in her own right, apart from my memory, with her own memories, in which I still live. He paused. Do I live in her memory?—really—? If not, then why is she melancholy and why does she suffer? I live in her melancholy and suffering. He thought all this as though it were some amazing occurrence. And suddenly a wave rose inside him: I ought to go and see her; and from some deep layer of his memory an image welled up. Lying in the middle of the road, a motionless man with chains on his feet and his forehead covered with blood where it had been struck by a brick. "Zakir! Is Majnun dead?"—"No, he's alive."—"No, Majnun is dead." And she began to cry —"Sabbo, he's just pretending."—"No, Majnun is dead." She went on crying.—Yes! I ought to go, and announce that I—

"Son, who is the letter from?" Ammi asked, coming into the room.

"From India."

"Letters are coming even from India. It's only Dhaka where something's happened so that no letters come," Ammi said sadly, and fell silent. Then, after thinking a bit, she said, "Who's the letter from?"

"From Surendar."

"Surendar." Ammi was confused.

"Ammi, don't you remember Surendar, who was my friend?"

"Oh, Surendar. *Ai*, what a time the poor man chose for writing."

“Ammi,” he asked, thinking about something, “Do we no longer have any relatives in Rupnagar?”

She stared at him. “Son, after a quarter of a century it’s occurred to you to ask? Who would still be there? We had already come away. Batul was left there, then she too went off to Dhaka with her daughter.”

“But Sabirah—?”

“Don’t mention Sabirah’s name in my presence!” Ammi said angrily.

“Why?” He watched Ammi’s face.

“She turned out to be an extremely self-willed girl.” Ammi elaborated: “First of all, I want to know why, when the whole family came away from there, she stayed behind. Why, if she had come here, some arrangement or other would have been made for her! Her marriage would have been arranged somehow within the family. There, she’s unmarried and lives a lousy life. And since she did stay there—well, she could at least have paid a bit of attention to the old mansion! Batul urged her so many times, and I wrote her too, ‘Daughter, take ten days’ leave for Muharram and have a look around: light the lamp in the Imambara, and raise the standards,’ but that wretched girl didn’t go at all, she didn’t look in even once! Finally refugees came and took over the place. Now she can whistle for it; but otherwise, she would have been the sole owner of the house—who would have gone from here to claim a share?”

“Ammi, if we were to go there, where would we stay?”

“Child, you’ve lost your senses, why would we go there now? Who of our family is still there?”

“There’s Rupnagar itself,” he said slowly and thoughtfully. Ammi, as though at a loss for an answer, said not a word.

Ammi was completely silent, but then she thought of something. She said, “*Ai*, last night I had a strange dream! It was as if we had gone there. Everyone was there, I was saying to Batul, ‘Sister, you went away leaving the house absolutely open. Just imagine—a whole house full of furniture, and not a single room locked up.’” Ammi was silent, then muttered, “I don’t know what it means. I’ll ask your father what kind of dream it was.”

Ammi fell silent, deep in thought. He too, along with her, was lost in distant reflections. After such a long time, mother and son sat together, floating in the same wave of memory. Where did the wave carry them? Where were they at that moment? They were wandering in their mansion in Rupnagar.

Just then Abba Jan arrived, coming in from somewhere. Seeing mother and son lost to the world, he was somewhat surprised.

“Zakir! What is it, what’s happened?”

“Nothing, Abba Jan,” he said slowly, and fell silent.

Then he looked at his wife. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing at all, we were only somehow remembering old things.” With a long sigh she came back from her journey to Rupnagar. On her return, how strange and unfamiliar the walls of this small rented house looked. For a little while she was again lost. Then she suddenly spoke. “Well, listen now, where is the key to the storeroom?”

“Storeroom? What storeroom?”

“*Ai hai*, you’ve already forgotten! Was there not a storeroom in our mansion?”

“Oh, the storeroom in the mansion.” Abba Jan was silent, then said, “Zakir’s mother, twenty-five years have passed.”

“Well, I’m asking about the key to the storeroom, not the number of years.”

“When you asked about the key to the storeroom, I thought I ought to tell you how much time has passed.”

“Oh, what does time have to do with it—time always goes on passing, but if the key to the storeroom’s been lost, it’s a disaster! All our old family heirlooms are shut up in there. All the things from my dowry are in there. And when Zakir, may God preserve him, was born, your father, to celebrate the birth of a grandson, sent sweets around to all the relatives on silver plates. Twelve of those plates are stored there too. And, yes, that shroud you sent for from Holy Karbala is in the same trunk with your father’s prayer carpet from Madina the Radiant, and the tablet of healing earth from Karbala, and your mother’s chest and Quran-stand.”

“Shroud?” Zakir looked at her with surprise.

“Yes, son, the shroud. When your grandfather came back from his pilgrimage to Karbala, he brought with him two shrouds that had been specially prepared there and had touched the Imam’s tomb. He himself was buried in one. *Are*, that’s why for forty days a sweet smell like musk came from his grave.”

“Forty days? You speak of forty days, but I know that whenever I went there to read the Fatihah, I felt that a sweet smell was coming from his

grave. It was a remarkable kind of sweet smell.” Abba Jan was silent, then sighed and said, “God alone knows what condition all those graves are in.”

“I did whatever I could. When we left for Vyaspur, I gathered all our family heirlooms carefully in the storeroom and locked it up. And before we left for Pakistan I told you again and again that I wanted to have just a final look around Rupnagar, and pick up anything that we should take with us, but you never listened to a word I said. Oh, if only I could have unlocked the storeroom just once, and at least aired things out in the sun! So much time has passed, I’m afraid the wretched termites will have been at them; there were so many termites in that house.”

I ought to go before the termites nibble everything away, he thought to himself. Then the question arose in his mind, as time passes why do termites get at things? What relationship is there between time and termites? Is time a termite, or is a termite time?

“Zakir’s mother! You don’t remember what was going on with the trains at the time. I myself wanted to have a last look around Rupnagar before leaving. I would have read the Fatihah one last time over my ancestors’ graves.” Abba Jan paused, then said, “And at least I would have brought my shroud.” After a pause he addressed Zakir: “Son, there I had made all the arrangements for my burial. The shroud was ready, and I’d chosen a place for my grave too. My family would only have had to take the trouble of cutting a few filbert branches and washing me,* then lifting me to their shoulders and lowering me into the grave. But here, there’s no arrangement. You’ll have to arrange everything.”

What great power the grave has in Muslims’ culture. A phrase from Surendar’s letter came to his mind.

“Oh, this is just the anxiety that eats at my heart, how will our deaths be!” Ammi said worriedly. “Our lives have passed somehow or other, but for death a hundred arrangements have to be made.”

So death requires more arrangements than life, he thought to himself. Just then there was a knock at the door.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Irfan.”

“Coming.” He rose and went to the door.

Ammi at once left the room, but Abba Jan waited for Irfan to come in. As he entered, Abba Jan threw out the question, “Well, young man, is there any news?”

“No sir, there’s no special news.”

“Young man, what kind of a journalist are you?” After a pause he said, “But it’s not your fault, that’s the state the newspapers are in nowadays. Once they used to publicize the news, now they conceal the news; in any case, may God have mercy, things don’t look good.” As he spoke, he rose and went inside.

“Yar, I was waiting for you, it was very boring, the Shiraz was absolutely empty today.”

“Really? Nobody was there?”

“Only that white-haired man. Today he found me alone and pounced on me. He was very boring.” He paused, then said, “Yar, that man seems a very suspicious character to me.”

“You’ve said something like this before.”

“But today I’m convinced of it.”

“Why?”

“Yar, anybody who makes a show of national feeling, I’ve begun to have doubts about.”

“Oh, let’s drop the subject, yar. I’ll tell you some news.”

“Really? All right.”

“Yar, today a letter came,” he said confidentially.

“From where?”

“From India.”

“From India?” Irfan looked him over doubtfully from head to foot. “A letter from India? In these times?—It was from some relative.”

“No, it was from my old friend Surendar.”

“A letter from Surendar, in these times?” Irfan said ironically, “Zakir, sometimes I have doubts even about you.”

“I’ve often had doubts about myself too. But anyway, for the present, read this letter.” He put the letter into Irfan’s hands.

Irfan read it carefully from start to finish. He was reading the letter, and Zakir was trying to understand his reaction from the expressions that passed over his face. After finishing the letter, Irfan laughed. “Yar, I thought that Sabirah was a figment of your nostalgic imagination. But she really exists.” He paused, then said, “Be that as it may, your love shows a wonderful sense of timing! What a season the fruit of love has chosen to ripen in!”

He ignored Irfan’s words, and said, “Yar, I want to go there.”

“What did you say? You want to go?”

“Yes, yar! I want to go and see her one time, before—” In the midst of speaking, he stopped.

“Before—” Irfan sarcastically repeated the word. Then he said, “My dear friend, a long time has passed.”

“Yes, a long time has passed, but still—” As he spoke, he fell into thought.

Ammi peered into the room. “*Are*, son, what’s making that noise outside?”

“Noise? What noise?”

“They’re saying that war has broken out.”*

“What? War has broken out?” They both jumped up at once, and hastily went out.

Now it was evening, and in the lane there was darkness from one end to the other. Light filtered out from the windows and air vents of many distant houses. But near them in the lane a clamor was rising, “Put out the lights!” “Turn off the light!”—and the lights in the houses were gradually going off. Now, into the far distance, the darkness was complete. A group of young volunteers, blowing whistles, swiftly entered the lane. Zakir advanced. “What is it, brother?”

“War has broken out.”

“Who says so?”

“There was an announcement on the radio.” And the group, blowing their whistles, swiftly turned off into another lane.

They both stood for a little while in silence. Then, sitting down in his own doorway, he said, “Yar, war has really broken out.”

“Yes,” Irfan said, thinking about something else, and sat down beside him.

They both sat there in the dusty doorway for a long time. In the dark lane, two silent shadows.

Suddenly a siren began to wail, and with it the sharp sounds of whistles from near and far. The sounds of whistles, and the thup-thup of running footsteps.

“Shouldn’t we go inside?” he said slowly.

“Is it any safer inside?” Irfan asked in a disagreeable voice.

“No.”

“Then?”

The sound of the siren gradually died out. The thup-thup of running footsteps, the sounds of whistles, people's cries and calls, the angry instruction "Turn off the light!"—gradually all these sounds ceased, and silence spread through the night. In that silence ears waited to hear some huge noise. They waited for a long time, no huge noise, no explosion could be heard.

"Yar!"

"Yes."

"Yar, I'm thinking that Sabirah—"

"So you're thinking about Sabirah?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

From the distance a low droning noise silenced them. They again strained their ears.

"Are they Indian planes?"

"Yes, from India, like the love letter you received today."

"But yar, I was thinking something else."

"What?"

"That now Sabirah will forget about Dhaka and seek out news from here."

"Listen," Irfan whispered ominously, and they both strained their ears again. The distant sound of an explosion, as though a bomb had fallen in some far-off unknown town. And then unfathomable silence, a fearful quiet. The whole city seemed to be motionless, holding its breath.

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SEVEN

CARS, TAXIS, scooter-cabs, horse-carts, all the vehicles were in a hurry and were trying to crawl over each other. It looked as though he'd have trouble crossing the street. He watched the vehicles. It happened that one car, with "Crush India" written on its bumper, full of passengers, loaded with luggage, rushed rapidly past him. The slogan written on the car's bumper was before his eyes for a little while, then was obscured in a cloud of dust. The car was in such a great hurry that it left the paved road for the dusty shoulder and kept moving, kicking up clouds of dust.

Now he examined the passing traffic with care. The cars and taxis had lost their shine. Their bodies were smeared with dirt. Every car, every taxi was full of passengers, loaded with luggage. In the horse-carts the luggage and the passengers were all jumbled in together. Oh God! Where were these people going? When he reached the Shiraz, he told Irfan of his astonishment. "Yar, today there was heavy traffic on our street—it was hard even to get across. After all, where are people going?"

"You've only seen the traffic on the road. I've just come from the scene at the train station."

"What's it like there?"

"Don't ask! There are so many passengers on the platform that it's hard to breathe, and not a single train coming. It's like Doomsday."

"And here's the Shiraz empty," he said, casting a glance around. Today the Shiraz was absolutely empty. He and Irfan, two souls, sat at one table. "Yar, today not even our friend the white-haired man has come."

Suddenly the door opened, and Afzal entered. He cast a glance around: "Empty?"

"Empty," Zakir answered bleakly.

"Where have the mice gone off to?"

"They got tired of waiting for your flute. They were so frustrated that they set off all by themselves and headed for the ocean," Irfan answered

sarcastically.

Afzal looked steadily at Irfan. As he slid out a chair and sat down, he said, “Disgusting man! Order tea.”

“Abdul!” Irfan called out.

Abdul came instantly, as though he had only been waiting for an order. “Yes sir!”

“Tea.”

Afzal said thoughtfully, “Yar, the birds are very worried. I’ve just come from the Ravi. When the planes come, the birds from all the neighboring gardens fly up in a state of utter confusion, circle around wildly in the air, and then the poor things hide in the trees again.” He paused, and muttered, “The birds in this town are worried.”

“And you?” Irfan looked steadily at him.

“I’m worried too.”

“Don’t you know that those who are worried are leaving the city?”

Afzal fell into thought. Then he said, “A traveler, passing through a forest, saw that a sandalwood tree was on fire. The birds who had been sitting on its branches had already flown away, but one wild goose still clung to a branch. The traveler asked, ‘Oh wild goose! Don’t you see that the sandalwood tree is on fire? Why don’t you fly away? Don’t you value your life?’ The wild goose replied, ‘Oh traveler! I’ve been very happy in the shade of this sandalwood tree. Is it right for me to run off and leave it in its time of trouble?’” Afzal fell silent, then said, “Do you know who it was?—The Buddha told this story, then looked around at the monks, and said, ‘Oh monks! Do you know who that wild goose was? I myself was that wild goose.’”

“Good!” said Irfan sarcastically. “I was hoping to hear you make that very announcement!”

Afzal stared at Irfan’s face, then said, “You’re right. Absolutely right. I myself was that wild goose.” He stood up and went to the door, but then something occurred to him and he turned back again. He approached Irfan, and said, “The Buddha was truthful, I too am truthful. In fact, in an earlier birth we two were one.”

Afzal had turned and begun to leave, when Abdul brought the tea. Irfan said, “The tea has come.”

Afzal looked benevolently at Irfan. “Irfan, you’re a good man.”

Afzal sat down. Irfan poured out the tea. Afzal, drinking tea, said, “Yar, whatever has happened has been for the best.”

“What has been for the best?”

“That the disgusting people are leaving the city. How pure the Shiraz looks today!” He paused, then said, “Yar, I’ve thought about it a lot. Finally I’ve reached the conclusion that virtuous people can save this country.”

“And where are they?” Irfan asked in his special sarcastic tone.

“Where are they? Fellow, don’t you see them? You and I are two. Yar, three are a great many.” Then he pulled out a notebook from his pocket, unscrewed the cap of his pen, opened the notebook, and said while writing something, “Irfan, I’ve forgiven you. I’ve entered your name on the list of virtuous people.” Then he murmured, “In my notebook the list of virtuous people keeps getting shorter and shorter from day to day.”

Suddenly a siren began to wail. Along with it, shrill piercing whistles were being blown. Afzal stood up: “I ought to go.”

“It’s the air-raid siren. Don’t go out, stay right here.”

“Zakir, you’re very fearful.” He paused, and said, “Fellow, don’t be afraid. Today I’ve arranged things with Data Ganj Bakhsh. I said, ‘Data, shall I take your city under my protection?’ He said, ‘Take it.’ So this city is now under my protection. Nothing will happen to it.” With these words, he rose and went out.

And so, night and day alike, at frequent intervals the siren wailed, and with the siren, the whistles blew. Traffic police and civil defense volunteers appeared in the streets, blowing their whistles, gesturing, and issuing instructions. Traffic on the streets suddenly speeded up, then slowed down, as vehicles left the road and found shelter under trees. Gradually the streets emptied, leaving only the traffic police, and volunteers with whistles clenched in their teeth. The street was empty from one end to the other. On both sides of it long lines of cars, scooter-cabs, taxis, and motorbikes were standing. All the traffic noise, all the sounds of the city were suspended. Everywhere all was motionless and silent. Sometimes a swiftly passing jeep tried to break the silence and immobility, but then it vanished in the space of a breath. In its wake the silence welled up again, the immobility became even more profound. And he sometimes sat with his back against a tree beside the road, sometimes lay in a trench behind the trees among unknown travelers, sometimes crouched in a corner of the Shiraz with his ears pricked up. At every moment he expected some extraordinary noise to

disrupt the peace of the atmosphere. But no noise came. No big explosion, no loud voices. Only a low drone in the distance. After it, perfect silence. And then the siren wailed, and this time its sound brought the hidden people out of their holes and corners, and scooter-cabs, motorbikes, cars, taxis instantly set off again with all their noise. Now the air was full of noise, and the traffic was moving at full speed, and again the siren began to wail. Again the whistles blew, again the people hid and the traffic stopped and silence spread all around. How many times this pattern was repeated each day! But when evening fell, the siren wailed in a different tone, so that the movement of traffic and the gait of pedestrians were suddenly disrupted. Instead of stopping, every vehicle dashed madly ahead, and every pedestrian hurried off at top speed. But gradually the noise faded into the distance. Silence spread with the evening haze, and joined with the lengthening shadow of night to fill the whole city. Taking advantage of this silence, the dogs began to bark at nightfall. Then it seemed that much of the night had already passed. So much of the night had passed, and so quickly! But after that the night did fall, and wouldn't even dream of passing. Then suddenly the siren wailed. Again the whistles. At the same time the dogs began to bark with a new enthusiasm. It seemed that all the dogs in the city had suddenly jumped up with a start. The sound of whistles and the dogs' barking saturated his senses. As he lay in bed, it seemed to him that the whole atmosphere was full of that disgusting noise. Lying on a cot nearby, Abba Jan slowly sat up, and began to recite something under his breath. Then Ammi turned over, and sat up.

"Zakir, son! Are you awake?"

"Yes, Ammi." And he sat up.

And after that Ammi raised both hands in prayer: "God protect us!" Abba Jan recited something in Arabic under his breath. Sometimes a prayer in the name of Ali, sometimes the Verse of the Throne. Ammi prayed in a high, quavering voice. Since the war began, at Ammi's wish we sleep in one room. In the darkness of night, three shadows sitting on their cots. Abba Jan is reciting verses from the Quran. Ammi is praying. And at such times I'm unable, even after so many nights of danger, to find any way to occupy my mind.

In the stillness our ears are trying to make out something. Welling up from the layers of silence, a droning sound. In the day, how low this sound

is, but in the night, how sharp and awe-inspiring. Suddenly, from somewhere far off, an explosion.

"Zakir!"

"Yes."

"Son! That sounded like a bomb."

"Yes."

"Where did it fall?"

Where did the bomb fall? The various lanes of the city rise up in my imagination. I try to guess from which direction the sound of the explosion came, and which neighborhoods are located in that direction. Abba Jan is entirely absorbed in reciting from the Quran, and my mind is wandering through the various lanes of the city. In Shamnagar I suddenly pause. That house in Shamnagar where we camped when we first came to Pakistan rises up in my imagination. Has the bomb fallen there? No, it shouldn't fall there. I have no emotional relationship with that house. The moment we left it, the house slipped out of my memory without leaving any imprint on my heart or mind. But suddenly now that house rises up in my imagination. Before my eyes I see the room in which I spent my first night after coming to Pakistan. No, the bomb shouldn't fall on that neighborhood. The house ought to stay safe, the whole house and the room which holds in trust the tears of my first night in Pakistan.

DECEMBER 5

I've thought of a means for keeping my mind occupied during the wartime nights, and I've put it into practice. That is, while outside dogs are barking somewhere in the distance, I'm sitting wrapped in a quilt, with a lantern before me, writing a diary.

The winter nights are long, and wartime nights are even longer. Now the seasons of war and winter have come together. The wartime day passes in listening to good news of victories and rumors of defeats, and in racing the horses of conjecture. How can the night pass? I come home well before curfew time. Ammi Jan tries to arrange it so that we finish eating before the blackout. This is how it works. We eat dinner before the blackout. Then Ammi closes up the kitchen and comes and sits at her ease in the room. At the same time, the sounds of footsteps cease in the lane outside. No sounds

of footsteps, no noise and commotion of children, no cries of mothers calling to their children. Complete silence falls. The sound of the volunteers' whistles ceases too. Suddenly the neighborhood dogs begin to bark in chorus. They receive encouragement and support from the dogs in distant neighborhoods. At nightfall, they create the effect of midnight. Silence, then siren and whistles, then the quiet, low drone of planes flying somewhere far off, then siren, then silence. The night stretched and stretched. It simply couldn't be ended.

Abba Jan has thought of a good means for passing the long wartime nights. He spreads out his prayer carpet and seats himself, and stays there far into the night. Following his example, Ammi Jan too has begun to prolong her late evening prayer.

I couldn't find a way to pass those nights. I couldn't read a book for very long by lantern-light. Ammi Jan didn't allow the lights to be turned on. And she was right. The bright electric light always manages to find its way through the cracks somehow or other, and shows outside. Then the volunteers make a commotion, "Turn off the light," "Turn off the light." And somehow I like the lantern. How lovingly I remember the lantern era, when electricity hadn't yet come to our Rupnagar, and inside in the house and outside in the lane there was only lantern light. When I was older, I passed through all the stages of my education by lantern light alone. But now things are such that I can only remember the lantern era. I can't read a book by lantern light. But I've found out today: I can write.

The primary point of writing this diary is that during the long wartime nights it will help me discipline my distracted mind, which suffers from insomnia and wanders restlessly all over; it will help me put my mind on a single track and protect myself from confusion of thought. But now I see another advantage of it as well. I'll be writing my wartime autobiography. After the war is over, provided I'm alive, I'll know how many lies I heard and how many lies I uttered and how afraid I was during the wartime nights, how often I trembled. I ought to preserve the record of my lies and my cowardice.

DECEMBER 6

My patriotic fellow citizens are happy, and most of all our patriotic newspapers are happy. Suddenly their circulation has doubled and tripled. Every day comes news of another victory. Every day people fall on the newspapers and snatch them up, and read the news of victory and are happy. But,

London is victorious and the Germans are advancing.*

Still, today there's news of a powerful, victorious advance onto their soil. Amritsar too has been taken. Khvajah Sahib told us this news so confidently, and ascribed it to such reliable sources, that Abba Jan was forced to believe it. But Abba Jan listens to defeats and victories, both kinds of news, with equanimity. After Khvajah Sahib had told us the news, I watched him carefully. On his serene face I caught a glimpse of satisfaction. When I left the house, from Nazira's shop to the Shiraz I heard the news everywhere that Amritsar had been taken.

DECEMBER 7

Today's fresh news: The airport at Agra has been totally destroyed. How? In the darkness of the blackout the marble Taj Mahal glimmered. This revealed the location of Agra, and of its airport, which was then destroyed by bombing.

When people read this news, and heard it with full details from their friends who had contact with informed sources, how happy they were! With this news a fallen reputation was suddenly restored; otherwise, we had already decided that the Taj Mahal, and the history which gave birth to the Taj Mahal, had no connection with Pakistan.

In this city too there's a building as white as marble. Today when we were sitting in the Shiraz, Irfan said in his sarcastic voice, "Yar, we knocked down the Imperial Hotel and built that pseudo-Taj Mahal,* and now I'm afraid it might take us all with it."

"How?"

"Yar, coming back from the office I passed through that street and I really felt afraid. That building can be seen so clearly in the darkness of the blackout, it even looks softly lighted! Enemy planes can easily make it out."

Even in peacetime, I had always objected to the building's white color. If along with being white a building becomes the Taj Mahal, that's different; otherwise, whiteness usually detracts from a building's dignity. Sun, storms, rain, bird-droppings: these four things combine to bestow venerability and grandeur on a building. But our city's white building is so new and so clean that it will be a long time before it can attain the dignity of buildings that have endured the heat and cold of the seasons.

In any case, now that the Imperial has been erased like a redundant letter from the city's slate, and Dolly and her admirers are only a legend, and the tawny cat has vanished, this building ought to be preserved. The time will come when its roofs will be black with bird-droppings, and birds will sit tranquilly amidst the immemorial black and white stains.

In this age one harmful effect of war is that it doesn't allow buildings to acquire dignity. Tall, grand buildings don't have time to become old before some war breaks out, and the bombers destroy them. After the war the cities are planned all over again, starting afresh, and even taller buildings are constructed. But while they're still new, another war starts, and before an air of grandeur and mystery comes to surround them, they fall into heaps of rubble.

DECEMBER 8

Last night was the limit. After writing my diary I lay down and immediately my eyes closed, but only a little while later Ammi shook me awake. "Son, the siren is sounding."

The same thing kept happening all night. I don't know how many times the siren wailed. I was very much afraid. I was afraid for this city where I had endured so many sorrows, where I had sat and remembered Rupnagar so vividly, where I kept it alive even now in my imagination. If something happened to this city, how could I bear it? I want to remember my sorrows. If a city is destroyed, the sufferings of those who lived there are forgotten at the same time. The tragedy of this war-stricken time is that our sufferings don't manage to turn into memories. The buildings, the places which hold our sorrows in trust, are reduced to nothingness in a moment by one single bomb.

I can do nothing else for this city, but I can pray, and I do pray. In my mind is a prayer for Rupnagar and its people as well, for I can no longer imagine Rupnagar apart from this city. Rupnagar and this city have merged together inside me, and become one town.

DECEMBER 9

Crossing the street in this city is no longer at all difficult. On the first morning of the war, what trouble I had, crossing the street! But then how quickly the rush of the traffic was diminished. As the days passed, the traffic kept lessening. How much the noise of the scooter-cabs diminished, and people's calls and shouts. Sometimes it seems that the only transport left in the city is the bus, which moves along from street to street as regularly as before—the only difference being that passengers no longer ride perched on the footboards or standing in the aisles. Few passengers, many seats. There aren't even any crowds at the bus stands. When the air-raid siren wails and the traffic police, blowing their whistles, move into the middle of the road, then lines of vehicles form on both sides of the road. At such times it seems that only scooter-cabs and taxis are still running in the city.

When evening falls, when I return home as the whistles announce the curfew, Ammi asks me for news of the city, and tells me how things are in the neighborhood: today the people of such-and-such a house went off to such-and-such a city. Every morning Khvajah Sahib knocks at the door, and sits at his ease in the drawing room, smoking the huqqah and telling the rumored reports of some new victory; and every day another house in the neighborhood is locked up. Every day Ammi comments on those who have gone.

Today Ammi seemed especially anxious. "*Ai hai*, will we be the only ones left in the neighborhood?"

"Zakir's mother," Abba Jan said gravely, "Death is everywhere. Where can a man go to flee from it? It is a saying of the Prophet's that those who run from death, run toward death instead."

I gazed at Abba Jan with wonder. This was the very thing that Abba Jan had said to Bi Amma when the plague spread in Rupnagar and people were closing their houses and leaving the town.

Two residents have taken leave of our house too. In our courtyard is a guava tree. During the good weather, a pair of bulbuls sniffed out its scent and found it, and settled in and made themselves at home. Ammi was very cross with the bulbuls. “Oh the wretches, they ruin the guavas! As soon as they start to ripen, the wretches stick their beaks in. They might at least let one guava ripen properly!”

“Ammi, birds too have a right to share in food that comes from the trees.”

Ammi stared at me. “That’s a fine idea, that we should do the work and the birds should do the eating!”

But where are those bulbuls now? On the first morning of the war, both bulbuls came flying along and settled on the guava tree. With zeal and enthusiasm, their beaks were exploring the ripening guavas—when a plane passed overhead with a tremendous roar. Both birds, frightened out of their wits, left the guavas and flew off.

Now a lot of guavas have ripened on our tree. Every day Ammi picks them and makes guava salad. Now no guava is ever marked by a beak. Those guests of our house, those sharers in our food, have gone.

Today as I left the Shiraz, evening was falling. When I finished my last sip of tea and came out, there was only a little time left until the curfew. Outside everybody was hurrying along. The vehicles were rushing at full speed. Cars, horse-carts, motorbikes, taxis, scooter-cabs. A sort of tumult had broken out, as if a film were just over. I was very much astonished. All day the streets were empty. Where had this flood of vehicles come from? On what invisible streets had these vehicles been traveling, that suddenly they were drawn to Mall Road?

I called to so many scooter-cab drivers, but no one heard me, no one stopped, although the scooter-cabs were empty. Caught in the traffic, one scooter-cab paused near me. When I pleaded with the driver, he said, “Man, if you want to go to Baghbanpura, I’ll take you.”

“Why Baghbanpura?”

“Because I have to go home, and the siren’s about to sound.”

Then I reflected that it would be useless to waste more time searching for transport. At that hour everyone was looking out for himself. It would be better to set out on foot, and perhaps on the way I’d find some scooter-cab going in that direction, or some kind person in a car would generously give me a lift.

In the twilight, the shutters of the shops were all hastily banging closed. The shopkeepers hurried to fasten the locks, and instantly disappeared, some in cars, some on motorbikes, some on foot. Day and night, no longer owing anything to the favors of electric light, were merging together. Darkness was slowly spreading through the streets and lanes. Somehow the thought occurred to me that in the past, every evening used to come like this. The lampless time of the forest, when hunters, after hunting all day, tried to reach their caves with their prey before evening fell. Then the time when a few towns were settled and lamps began to glow, when the townspeople, after working all through the daylight, headed homeward with long strides as twilight fell, hoping to arrive before the lamps were lit. Then the time when big cities were settled, and walls built around the cities, when caravans endured the hardships of traveling day after day on hot, desolate routes under the fiery sun, and tried to enter the city before nightfall. The caravan that moved too slowly found the gates of the city closed, and spent the whole dark night in the shelter of the walls, unprotected.

The war threw the life of the city into confusion. Inside me, times and places are topsy-turvy. Sometimes I have absolutely no idea where I am, in what place. The day declines, evening is coming, the forest paths are growing silent. I'm heading, with long strides, toward my cave.

DECEMBER 10

In the College, classes and such are not being held; so I put in a brief appearance and then come to sit in the Shiraz. Then Irfan comes. Sometimes Afzal too inflicts himself on us. Salamat and Ajmal are nowhere to be seen, but I've heard that after being revolutionaries they've now become ardent patriots, and go around collecting gifts for the soldiers. That's more than we're doing.

What was I good for when it came to love?*

We sit in the Shiraz and talk. Our talk too is desultory and goes nowhere. Today I said to Irfan, "Yar! I don't get any benefit out of your newspaper work."

"What benefit do you want?"

“Yar, you have a curfew pass, there’s the newspaper car, can’t you show me the city in the blackout?”

“I can show you. But it takes courage to see a flourishing city reduced to a desolate condition.”

“I’ve seen so many curfews in this city! By now, surely I’ve acquired the courage.”

“The experience of seeing the city under curfew is one thing. This is an absolutely different experience.”

Afzal interrupted: “Irfan is right. Don’t look. You’ll be scared.”

“Have you seen it, or are you speaking without having seen it?”

“Fellow! When I talk about it, I’ve seen it.” He paused, then spoke as a frightened man speaks. “Two nights ago when Irfan sent me home in his office car, we passed through dark silent streets, and I looked at the houses to the right and left with terror. Every house was silent and still, as though there were no one inside. It seemed to me that these weren’t people’s homes, but mouse-holes. The mice sat fearful and shrinking. I was frightened.”

Afzal has gone me one better. To me, when I go out alone at night into the lane for a look around, the houses in my neighborhood seem like voiceless, noiseless caves, enveloped in darkness.

DECEMBER 11

I’m sitting in a cave. Outside stands the black night, with its jaws opened wide. Siren, whistles, the sound of dogs barking—but human voices absent. As though there had been an Emigration, and people had gone somewhere else. The city held captive in the spell of war. From time to time all the neighborhood dogs bark so furiously that they seem to be entering my cave. Then they fall silent, but the sound of barking continues in the distance. At night, when you’re traveling through the forest, that’s how it is. From unseen, unknown towns, the barking of dogs comes, and keeps coming. It becomes a kind of encirclement, as though the traveler were moving within an enclosure of barking dogs. As though the dogs had surrounded the whole terrestrial sphere. I’m encircled by fear. Deep in the forest, far from my cave. Times and places are scrambled inside me. Where am I going? In

what time? In what place? Every direction confused, every place disordered.

. . . Emerging from the forest, I entered a town. But what kind of a town? Not a trace of any son of Adam. Empty streets, desolate lanes, the shops closed, the mansions locked up. My dear friends! For a long time I wandered around in amazement. Finally when I saw a mansion with big gates, I felt some hope that perhaps there might be people in it. I knocked and cried out, “Is anyone there?” No answer. I knocked again with force, and loudly cried out, “Is anyone there?” I heard nothing but the echo of my own voice. Terror overcame me. I said to myself that I should leave the town, for fear that some calamity would overtake me. As I was thinking this, I saw a lake. Its water was partly clear, partly muddy. In the midst of the lake, an elephant and a tortoise were fighting with each other, but neither of them won, and neither of them was defeated.

I was standing there in astonishment, watching the fight, when a faqir appeared. He approached the lake. Pausing, he cast a sad glance at the elephant and tortoise, and sighed. Then he said, “If only they were devoid of knowledge, and their words were without power!”

These words of the faqir’s surprised me. I came and stood before him with my hands folded and petitioned, “Oh venerable sir, what have you known, and what have you seen, that you have brought such words to your lips?” He replied, “Oh dear son, three things debase a man: a woman when she is not faithful, a brother when he asks for more than his right, knowledge when it comes without hard labor. And three things deprive the earth of peace: an ignoble man when he rises to high rank, a learned man when he begins to worship gold, a master when he becomes cruel.”

When I had heard these words, I stared at the venerable man’s face, and began to try to unravel the knot of his words with the fingernails of comprehension. When I failed to unravel it, I petitioned, “Oh venerable man, explain the point of these abstractions.”

Then he asked me, “Dear son, in what state have you seen this town?” I said, “Venerable sir, I have seen this town uninhabited.”

Then the faqir spoke as follows: “Dear son, the story of this town is that its chief was a man of pure heart and virtuous character. In addition to worldly wealth, he was also rich in the wealth of the spirit. When his life was drawing to a close, he sent for his sons, who were two in number, and

embraced each of them. This relieved his soul. He said, ‘Sons! I have divided my knowledge equally between you both, and, oh my sons! after I am gone divide the rest of my property between you in the same way, for I fear the day might come when you would seek for more than your right, and would bring down disaster on the Lord’s creatures.’

“With these words, the virtuous man drew his last breath, and left this death-bound world, and set out for the world of life everlasting. Both sons mourned him very much, but when they sat down to divide the property, they forgot their father’s injunction and began to demand more than their right. From this a quarrel resulted. In the course of their quarrel, they used the power of the knowledge bequeathed by their father, to curse each other. The elder looked at the younger with angry eyes, and said in the tone of a curse, ‘You are a tortoise.’ The younger looked with hatred at the elder and said in the tone of a curse, ‘You are a rutting elephant.’ So after that the younger became a tortoise, and the older took on the form of a rutting elephant. Ever since then they have both been mad with rage, and have been fighting.”

Hearing this moral tale, I inquired, “Oh venerable sir! What will be the outcome of this battle?” He replied, “The water of the lake will become muddy.” I said, “That has already happened.” He replied, “Even muddier.” I asked, “How muddy?” He said, “So much so that the lake will become a swamp, and dust will blow through the town.”

. . . Full of fear, I left the deserted town. I went in search of an inhabited town. I wandered through forests and jungles. The Lord had so arranged it that I saw signs of habitation in the distance. I set out on that road. When I drew near, what did I see? A new land: a beautiful city with a pleasing atmosphere. In the gardens were all kinds and species of fruit-bearing trees, all colors of roses and flowers, sweetly singing birds on every branch, young deer as swift as the wind on every path. Sweetly scented streets, perfumed lanes. The bazaars so crowded that shoulder rubs against shoulder, water vessels clink rhythmically together. The water-carriers, draped in red garments, go along with their water-skins on their shoulders, sprinkling the streets. The bearers of drinking water serve up overflowing cups drawn from the fountain of Paradise. The shops are clean and elegant, there is one goldsmith’s shop after another. Balconies, mirror-walled rooms; a delicately beautiful woman swings in a swing, glancing at her lovely face

in a tiny mirror-ring. Admiring herself, she says, Oh my, oh my Lord! One abode of beauty wears a robe of flowing-water fabric, so that the gaze travels clearly through it from one side to the other. One rose-faced woman has dark collyrium around her eyes, a dark red color-paste on her lips, a bosom in full flower, a veil slipping down from her shoulders, a belly like a tablet of sandalwood, a navel like a golden cup, below it a place like a juicy sweet. Beyond this the curtain is drawn, modesty holds sway. “Guess from my garden what my springtime is like.”* He who has Fortune for a helper, and courage by his side, let him dive in and bathe in the Ganges of accomplishment: swimming is auspicious for the courageous.

. . . One time I became Abul Hasan of the *Thousand and One Nights*. I wandered in streets and lanes, and was amazed. But gradually my eyes opened, and a strange scene was before them. I was stupefied. Whenever I looked at a head, I found it gone. The man healthy and well, the head gone. I was inwardly astonished: is this a dream, or the waking world? I rubbed my eyes and looked; still the same scene. Oh God, where have these people’s heads gone? For a long time I remained silent. Finally the hem of self-restraint slipped from my grasp. I inquired of a passerby, an old man who had a reliable face, “Oh sir, don’t men have heads in your city?” This aged man looked me over from head to foot with wonder, and said, “Oh young man! It seems that you’re a stranger in this city, that you ask such a question. So if you don’t know, be silent, and if you do know, even then be silent, for the walls have ears.” Then the old man took me to his own house, and entertained me lavishly, and said, “Oh dear friend! Hear my words: our heads have become food for our king’s serpents.” Hearing this, I was much amazed. Then the old man explained, “Oh my dear friend! Hear my words: on our king’s shoulders, right and left, two serpents are always hissing. Men’s heads are their food. Every day in this city lots are cast, every day two men are seized and their heads are cut off and fed to the Glorious King’s serpents.* And now in this city the people who still have their heads are so few that you can count them on your fingers. But for how long? If someone’s head wasn’t cut off yesterday, it will be today; and if it isn’t today, it will be tomorrow. And hear my words: tomorrow at the crack of dawn the drum will sound, and after that the lots will be cast.”

Hearing this stunning story, I was drowned in the whirlpool of amazement. As I gradually came to my senses, my inquiring curiosity

awoke, and at first dawn I prepared to go to the appointed place. The old man tried to detain me: “Oh rash and shortsighted one, have pity on your youth, and abandon this intention! We are the king’s people, so we are forced to witness this scene. You are endangering yourself for nothing. The king’s men will see you, and write your name down too, and include you in the casting of lots!” At this opposition, the flames of my curiosity leaped up higher. I paid absolutely no heed to the old man’s advice. My mind was obsessed with the desire to see what events Nature would bring to fruition that day, and with whose head Death would play.

When I approached the palace, what did I see but a big crowd, including both the great and the small. Rich and poor, noble and base-born, needy and wealthy, beggars and benefactors, grain-sellers and grocers, aristocrats and vazirs all stood together and awaited the result of the casting of lots.

When the names emerged, the people were stupefied. They all stared at each other, they began to wring their hands in grief, to sigh and lament. I asked the old man, “What unfortunate ones has Death selected, that the people are grieving so much?” At which he sighed and spoke as follows: “Oh dear friend! The two upon whom the lot has fallen today are the choicest pearls of wisdom of the pearl-showering court. They are men of elevated thought and radiant intelligence, whose minds have a far reach. In knowledge and learning they are peerless. They are divers in the ocean of wisdom. The fame of their wisdom reaches from Rome to Syria. They understand the mysteries of sovereignty. They unravel the largest possible knots with the fingernail of strategy. Now when they are deprived of their heads, the lamp of knowledge will be extinguished, the city will be left without wisdom.”

Sighing and mourning were of no avail, the casting of lots was the handwriting of fate. Who could evade it? Both wise men’s heads were cut off and placed before the serpents on a platter. But the serpents struck once with their jaws, then turned away and began to hiss with rage. The king looked angrily at his retinue and asked, “Traitors! What did you mix into this delicate food, that the serpents aren’t eating it and are hissing with rage?” Those around him petitioned with folded hands, “Refuge of the World, how could we ever presume to mix anything into the food of the exalted serpents? But in fact, what is there for the serpents to dine on at all? The skulls of those choicest wise men of the age were empty of brains.”

. . . I feared this populous city more than the empty desolate city. Somehow or other, keeping out of sight, I managed to steal away from it. I rendered thanks to the True Provider for allowing me to bring my head safely away. Abandoning all thought of villages, cities, towns, I wandered in the wilderness. I am wandering still. Sometimes in the desert with no grass or water, sometimes in dense forests. Towns pursue me with their barking dogs. In the forest I never saw a single dog. Dogs are in towns. When dogs bark, in towns and their outskirts, it sounds at night in the forest as though all the dogs in all the towns are facing toward the forest and barking. I'm surrounded. Towns seem to have encircled the forest on all sides. The dogs' voices come from all around, as though they have formed a giant ring and are facing me and barking. How long the nights are in the forest. How far I am from my cave—the wail of the siren, whistles, silence—

"Son! Put out the lantern, its light might be seen outside," Ammi Jan says in a frightened whisper, so that her voice won't reach up to the airplanes.

"Yes, all right."

I put out the lantern. There should be perfect darkness in the cave.

DECEMBER 12

All daytime affairs have passed away with the day, now here I am and here's the night. How long the wartime nights are! And there's just no real end to them. As though I'm walking in the forest, as though I've been traveling for centuries. The silence of the forest and the stillness of centuries. Dogs in the sleeping towns, jackals in the forest. Their voices don't disturb the world's sleep, they make it deep. Sleeping towns, sleeping centuries, the sleeping forest can all awaken at any moment. As they've begun to awaken inside me—

. . . I was tired from the long trip. I stumbled as I walked. Under a tree, on a leopard-skin, with his glorious long locks of hair twisted up together, his eyes closed, his breath controlled, he sat there like an old banyan tree with its branches intertwined in the midst of the forest. Before him stood Nandi the Bull, and in his twisted hair a dove had built a nest and was sitting on her eggs; she flew up with a whir of wings when she saw the raja coming.

He lifted his radiant eyelashes and looked at the raja, and asked, “Oh raja, will you take or will you give?”

“I’ll fight. If I can take I’ll take, if I’m forced to give I’ll give.”

“How will you fight?”

“As heroes always fight. I’ll put an arrow in my bow, and fall upon the enemy.”

“What bow and what arrows?”

“The bow of intelligence and the arrows of questions.”

“Then raise your bow, and shoot an arrow.”

“Speak: what never has its fill of what?”

“Oh raja! Eight things never have their fill of eight things.”

“What eight things never have their fill of what eight things?”

“The ocean, of water from the rivers; the fire, of fuel; the woman, of sexual pleasure; the raja, of dominion; the rich man, of wealth; the learned man, of knowledge; the foolish man, of folly; the tyrant, of oppression.”

Having heard this, the raja touched his feet. “Blessings upon you, great sage, I bestow upon you one hundred cows.”

“I accept the gift. Ask something more.”

“Oh great sage, how shall I walk?”

“Walk by the light of the sun.”

“And when the sun goes down?”

“Then walk by the light of the moon.”

“And when the moon goes down?”

“Then light a lamp, and walk by its light.”

“And when the lamp goes out?”

“Then light the lamp of the inner self, and walk by its light.”

The raja again touched his feet. “Blessings upon you, great sage, I bestow upon you one hundred cows more.”

The raja again raised his bow. He had begun to shoot arrows, when the sage said, “Raja, stop now.”

“Why should I stop?”

“Because in this world cows are few, and questions many.”

. . . I looked at him, he looked at me: “What do you want?”

“Peace.”

“Peace?” He looked at me in surprise. “In this ocean of existence, peace?” I went on staring. The dove’s nest was empty. He jerked his head,

so that the eggs fell and broke. Siren—then the dogs will wake up—

DECEMBER 13

“Is it news, or a rumor?”

“Sir! It’s confirmed news. The Seventh Fleet has set out.”

“Really?”

“Really. It’s about to enter the Bay of Bengal. Now the tide of the war is going to turn.”

In the Shiraz, at Nazira’s shop, in our house where Khvajah Sahib brings the news moment by moment to Abba Jan, everywhere people are discussing America’s Seventh Fleet. It’s as though dried-up shoots of rice are feeling the rain. I remember that I saw a poster somewhere on this theme. Where? On what wall? I call to mind the various walls of the city. Which wall was it? I wander around, looking at wall after wall—so it was this wall!

. . . The wall of the Jama Masjid, there’s a biggish poster on it with a picture of a sword and shield. It gives the news that the Persian Army has set out, and has almost reached Jahanabad. The people are gathered, as though the whole of Jahanabad has congregated there.

“Friend, what kind of newspaper is that? What news does it give?”

“Well, sir, the news is clear—the Persian Army is coming at full speed. You can consider them as already here; the days of the English are numbered.”

“No, really?”

“Well, sir, you can read it for yourself.”

“Really? Then there’ll be a lot of fighting.”

“Indeed, sir, there certainly will.”

“But my dear friend! The English aren’t just an easy morsel. The Ganges flows under their feet!”

“True, sir! But then, Persia doesn’t piss a thin stream either! The English will be ready to cry for their mothers’ milk!”

A wave of happiness ran through Jahanabad, rain fell on the dried-up fields. People can hardly contain their joy, they strut when they walk.

“Well, you clod, you’ve dressed up like a soldier today! Bastard, you think so much of yourself, have you got a girl?”

“You babbler, you don’t know enough to come in out of the rain!”

“If I don’t know, then tell me. Have you cooked up some tall tale again?”

“Why you dolt, the Persians are coming!”

“No!”

“If you don’t believe me then go to the Jama Masjid, there’s a bulletin posted there.”

“What would the Persians come here for, man?”

“Man, you must have dropped something on your head! Why, they’re coming to have a bout with the English!”

“Swear by my head.”

“I swear by your head. Now those bastard English will get what’s coming to them!”

“Then we’re in luck.”

“We’re in luck and more luck.”

“Hey, Otter! Will you have a chance to use your *binot*?

“If the chance comes—you just keep a cube of copper ready for me! I’ll dislocate those bastard Britishers’ wrists for them!”

•

But I couldn’t linger too long here. It was almost curfew time. I stopped a scooter-cab driver.

He said, “Sir, I’ll have to come back in the blackout.”

“Yar, I’ll give you more than the meter says.”

“All right, get in.”

The moment he started the scooter-cab, he began. “Sir, what news of the war?”

“No fresh news.”

“Then I’ll tell it to you! The Chinese Army has come.”

“Who says?”

“A gentleman was riding in my scooter-cab, he told me. It’s certain news, sir. The Chinese Army fights all the night-battles.”

“What’s so special about the night ones?”

“In the day, they’d be recognized. At night, they fight in disguise.”

•

. . . “Friend, who is this Lady in Green?”

“A Lady in Green. I’ve heard of her. ‘This is a new flower blooming!’”*

“Friend, you say you’ve heard of her. There are people who have seen her. She falls on the enemy like a bombshell from the Unseen. She dices the Khakis up like carrots and radishes! When the field is won, she vanishes. After that, not even the hem of her garment can be seen.”

“Indeed, sir! It’s a strange affair.”

“Oh sir! You’re speaking of the Green Lady. Let me tell you about it. Your humble servant has seen her with his own eyes.”

“Really, my friend?”

“Sir, anyone who tells lies is an infidel. When the fighting was going on at the Kabuli Gate post, then, sir, I too prepared for death and leaped into the battle. I swear by Ali the Chosen One, the Lion of God, I reduced the bastard Khakis to wrecks! As we’re fighting, what do I see but a lady dressed from head to foot in green, with a veil over her face, a sword in her hand, mounted on a horse, falling upon the Khakis’ ranks! I was amazed: who can this lady be! Sir, she did wonders. She cut such a swath with her sword, that heads flew like ripe grain! She sliced the bastards in pieces like bread. The Khakis fled with their tails between their legs When the battle was over, and I turned to look—well, sir, she had vanished. I searched with my eyes here and there, but there wasn’t the slightest trace of her.”

DECEMBER 14

. . . Today I’m wandering in the city. Things don’t look so good. The city is in bad shape. The posts are deserted. I see more soldiers in the bazaars than at their posts. The Easterners who came out of Meerut like a blazing flame seem now to have grown cold. They eat different kinds of sweets, they take marijuana, they have a special taste for jalebis. From every snack-seller, they demand jalebis along with their snacks. The city’s snack-sellers are tired of the Easterners. As for Bakht Khan’s holy warriors, the chance to show their mettle in the battlefield has slipped out of their hands.

The Royal Court, which once showered pearls, is now shadowed by misfortune. A web of conspiracy has been spread there, the trustworthy have become untrustworthy. The Court beauties are still there, but they bat

their eyelashes at strangers. Bakht Khan, a man of the battlefield, has come to Court and been checkmated. The generalship has been divided and shared out. Now even Mirza Mughal has a share in it. Too many cooks spoil the broth. And indeed Mirza Ghaus has leaped into the midst of it. The Timurid blood is no longer hot enough for anything but boasting and blustering. Sometimes it's hot enough to suffice for the ladies who have fallen into their hands. Mirza Ghaus boasts too much about his fighting, and fights too little; but even more than his boasting, this verse by His Majesty echoes in the air:

The cannons cannot; so look out for your life
Ai Zafar! the sword of India is done for![*]

May the Lord have mercy on this city. I have seen the walls of the Red Fort turn pale.

The simple-hearted people of Delhi are still waiting for the Persian Army.

DECEMBER 15

. . . The moment I stepped outside the door, there was such an explosion that all the doors and walls trembled. It seemed as though someone had exploded gunpowder right in the street. When I went on, in Chauri Bazaar I saw a lively crowd of Easterners around a snack-seller's shop. Some were shouting for snacks, others clamoring for jalebis. I asked them what had caused the explosion.

"What did you say, you there?" one asked, cramming a handful of sweets into his mouth.

"Just now there was an explosion, as if a cannon had been fired right nearby."

"Some son of a bitch must have set off some gunpowder," another said carelessly.

"Look, you!" a third said angrily. "All this war stuff can go take a flying leap. You leave us alone to tend to our bellies. Go on, get the hell out of here!"

I went on, feeling abashed. Are these the men who will protect the Throne of Delhi?

I stand between the tomb of Hare-bhare Shah and the Jama Masjid, and look toward the sky. Oh my Lord! While His Majesty the Emperor, the Shadow of God, is here, what shadow is it that I see trembling on the minarets of the mosque and the turrets of the Fort?

A naked faqir, with a grey beard, long dirty tangled hair, and eyes like glowing coals, screamed wildly, “Get away, don’t you see that there are corpses here?”

“Corpses? What corpses? Where are they?” I cast a glance around.

The faqir fell silent. He muttered, as though talking to himself, “Keep your mouth closed. Who told you to reveal the mysteries of the Lord?” Then he went off toward Hare-bhare Shah’s tomb. As he neared the tomb, he vanished from my sight.

DECEMBER 16*

. . . Today is September 14,* Doomsday. The cruelest day of the year ’57. When I left the house, I saw the city in utter disarray. I stood there astonished—when suddenly there was a loud explosion, as though a hundred rifles had been fired together. I was bewildered. I didn’t know where I should go. My feet of their own volition took me toward the Red Fort.

When I reached the gate of the Fort, what do I see but the gate closed, the lock fastened, no doorkeeper, no watchman. Near the gate a cannon has been mounted, but there’s no one to fire it. My mind is confused; it’s stranger than strange. The Fort of Shah Jahan locked up—? Finally someone appeared. I recognized him. It’s the doorkeeper of the Pearl-showering Court. Where is he running off to? I stopped him. He kept on running, and said, “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get away from here. A platoon of Khakis are coming.”

“And His Majesty the Shadow of God?”

“His Majesty the Shadow of God is at Humayun’s Tomb. The princes and princesses are scattered here and there. They’ve taken refuge wherever they can. The Fort is empty, it rings like a hollow pot.”

I turned back. The streets were dead silent, but from the distance came the sound of cannons being fired. Sometimes one way, sometimes another. Sometimes by covered paths, sometimes on the open road. Sometimes the

street was empty from one end to the other. Sometimes terrified people, with small bundles clutched under their arms, followed by their families, were running away. In Chauri Bazaar I saw a different scene. People stood with sticks and bamboo rods. One man left his house carrying a slat from a bed-frame, and came and joined the ranks. Another came from his house armed with a blow-pipe, and took up a firm position in the middle of the street, flexing his biceps.

I approached them and asked confidentially, “Dear friends, what is your intention?” The one with the blow-pipe thundered, “To fight!”

I looked with amazement at the one with the blow-pipe, then at the one with the bed-frame slat, and then went on. Then my amazement somehow subsided. All right, fighters can fight even with blow-pipes and tongs and bed-frame slats. Those who won’t fight will abandon charged cannons and loaded rifles and run off.

Passing by the Jama Masjid, I paused. I couldn’t move. A carpet of corpses had been spread. From the direction of Hare-bhare Shah’s Tomb a furious voice came: “Who told you to linger here? Go away!” I looked that way. It was that same naked, mad faqir. A fit of shivering came over me. Walking swiftly, I went on. From then on I didn’t look to one side or the other. I went running home.

•

At home, Ammi Jan sat weeping floods of tears. When she saw me, her grief was intensified. “Son, what will become of Batul?”

Abba Jan sat there, patient and serious. He looked at me, hesitated, then said, “Is this news true?”

What answer could I give? I knew exactly as much as everybody else knew. I thought, then said, “I’m going to Irfan’s office. I’ll find out there what’s the real news.”

“Then go, and come back and bring us word.”

Everyone I ran into on the road, everyone I asked, everyone was just as informed and just as uninformed as I was myself. No one had any confirmed news. And everyone knew that it had happened, and no one believed it. Torn between belief and disbelief, on the way from home to the Shiraz I decided a thousand times that this news was only a rumor, and decided a thousand times that this rumor was real news.

My guess was that Irfan would be in the Shiraz at that hour. He was there.

“Irfan! Have you come from your office?”

“Yes. Do you want the news?”

“Yes!”

“Don’t ask. No one knows the real state of affairs. We tried very hard to make contact with Dhaka, but we didn’t succeed.”

“There’s no telling what shape poor Zavvar will be in.”

“Those people were moved from the Governor’s House to the Intercontinental.”

“And my mother is worried about her sister.”

“She has good cause to worry, but what can we do?”

“You’re right.” I fell silent.

The Shiraz was full then, but no one was drinking tea. They were all asking each other questions. They were asking about what they already knew. They had already accepted what they were refusing to accept.

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EIGHT

NOW HIS whole being was concentrated in his legs. Normally, while he walked he thought about so many things, and while he was thinking he found himself ending up in one place or another. Now he was solely and exclusively walking. He walked with swift steps; what with the noise of his footsteps, he couldn't hear any other voices, or perhaps there were no other voices. He was walking alone in the empty city, and the whole air was echoing with the sound of his two feet. The noise of his footsteps overpowered even the noise of a scooter-cab: when the scooter-cab came right up near him on the street and began to move slowly alongside, he realized that the scooter-cab was empty and the driver was looking at him. "No," he said, and the driver speeded up and went off. Whenever I really have to go somewhere, then the scooter-cabs fly by like winged horses, none of them stop. And today, when I don't have to go anywhere, there's an empty scooter-cab with me at every step, inviting me, as though I were the only passenger in the city. He lifted his eyes and glanced around, then looked off ahead into the distance. There seemed to be no one around, either nearby or in the distance. Where has everyone gone? Once more he examined the scene, near and far. He saw a few small groups standing still or slowly walking along, talking among themselves, with drained, collapsed faces. Why are all their faces drained and collapsed? With fear?

As he walked along, his gaze fell on a wall with a big poster on it. On horseback, sword in hand, bloodthirsty face, "these fighters for the faith, these your mysterious servants."* It produced no reaction in him: for now this picture was dead, and the words too. At the next corner the same poster, the same picture, the same words. A dead picture, dead words. The image of a rally-ground rose up in his mind. Banners hung everywhere, and big posters waving in the air like banners. At the time how alive their words and pictures seemed! The rally is thrown into disorder. The rally-ground lies empty but the posters still wave in the air. The words written on them, the

pictures printed on them—how dead they look. Days afterward, no one has taken down the posters. A car passed by him. On its bumper was written "Crush India." Perhaps the car owner had forgotten about the slogan? If not, then—if not, then what? He didn't understand anything. The truth was that his mind was empty, empty. His mind, and his heart too. Since morning he'd had the most intense need to think, to feel. He hadn't yet comprehended how one goes about feeling a great disaster. In the morning he stayed shut up in his room for a long time, and kept trying to feel something. The more he tried to feel, the more he was overpowered by numbness. Then Khvajah Sahib came, and when he was sent for he was obliged to go and sit in the drawing room. Khvajah Sahib always imagined that Zakir knew more than other people. Today as well, he had sent for him because of this suspicion. But what did he know? He only knew what everyone else knew too. Even Khvajah Sahib didn't ask him too many questions today. Today he had only one question.

"Maulana Sahib, what's this that has happened?"

Abba Jan answered Khvajah Sahib's mournful question in a dry tone: "Khvajah Sahib, this world is a place of reckoning. Men reap whatever they sow." Then, in silence, he began smoking his huqqah.

Khvajah Sahib sat in silence. Then he said, "Maulana Sahib, when I was listening to the radio, I wanted to weep floods of tears. But I'm an old man; it's not proper for me to weep before young children. I sat there, restraining myself. Finally I rose and left the room, and placed a chair in the courtyard under a tree, and sat outside. There was no one near me. They were all sitting inside, listening to the radio. All my self-control broke down, and I wept." Khvajah Sahib's eyes filled again, but he restrained himself. He sat in silence. Then with a sigh he rose, paused, and then said, "Maulana Sahib! Pray for my older boy. His mother has been weeping constantly since last night."

"Khvajah Sahib! Tell her to have patience. God the Most High gives to the patient, the reward of patience. 'Surely God is with the patient.'"* Then he closed his eyes, and began to recite something under his breath. He had put his huqqah aside. His eyes were closed, and his lips were moving. Zakir went on staring at him; he wanted to get up and quietly slip away, but it seemed that his legs had no strength.

Now it was as if all his strength had gone into his legs. Swiftly moving feet—at this moment they were all he was. From one road to another, from

the second road to a third. Reading the posters on the walls. It seemed that he would cover the whole city, and would read everything that was written on the city's walls, whether in the form of life-size posters, slogans written in chalk and charcoal, or abuse and insults. But without feeling anything. Without any sense of boredom he read so many posters with the same message, and so many two-word slogans written in English on car bumpers, on car windows. He felt that he was not reading slogans, but walking on dead flies. He began to feel nauseated. Lifting his eyes from the walls, he began to watch the people passing nearby. All their faces, drained and collapsed, looked the same. Devoid of feeling. Only the slightest trace of fear quivered in them. They seemed like shadows themselves, as though they were weightless. Do I have weight? he suddenly thought, and fell into doubt. Walking along quickly, he suddenly slowed down and began to measure each step. He was trying to feel weight in himself. Do I have weight, or not? When does it happen that a man becomes weightless, and when does it happen that a man's body becomes a burden to him, and his head a heavy load on his shoulders? Another scooter-cab, which had come alongside him and was moving at a turtle's pace. Seeing that the scooter-cab was empty, he absentmindedly began to climb into it, when a thought struck him: Where do I want to go? Nowhere at all. When I have to go somewhere, every scooter-cab is full and every empty scooter-cab races by on the far side of the street. And now, when I don't have to go anywhere, they sit on my head. "I'm not going." The scooter-cab speeded up and moved off down the street.

He had given no instructions to his feet. He was just walking, taking long strides. But "the Mulla goes only as far as the mosque." After wandering all over, he had to come there. Irfan was already there, with a cup of tea before him and a cigarette dangling between his lips.

"Tea?"

"I've walked a lot today."

"Why?"

"I just did."

"Are you tired?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Anyway I'll have to have tea."

Irfan ordered more tea. Abdul brought the tea very quickly, put it down, and went off without a word.

He and Irfan sat opposite each other, drinking tea, as though there were no connection at all between them. As he drank the tea, his glance happened to fall on a wrinkled, crumpled newspaper—and then was fixed there. It was all the same news, and the same headlines, that he had read at home. At that time the headlines had attacked him like enemies. But now all these heavy, thick, sensationalist headlines looked like a pile of dead words. But he had to do something to keep himself busy, after all. Listlessly he ran his eye over some of the headlines. Somehow he began reading a news item. He went on reading, without taking in what he was reading. His eyes were occupied, his mind disengaged. Finally he lost interest entirely. Pushing the newspaper aside, he glanced at Irfan, who had finished his tea and lit a cigarette. He too removed a cigarette from the packet on the table, held it between his lips, and lit it.

“Yar, say something.”

“Is it so necessary to talk?”

“It’s not necessary, but still . . .” As he spoke, he cast a glance around. A few of the tables were occupied. At one table a man was sitting alone, drinking tea and reading a newspaper with great concentration. At another table very near by, a man had finished his tea and was staring into space. Near the kitchen, a group sat around a table. They were talking, but in very low voices, and haltingly. Despite the tea-drinkers, how silent the Shiraz was today!

The white-haired man entered just as he always did. He started toward their table, then changed his mind and went to sit at his own table near the counter. Abdul approached: “Tea?”

“Yes, tea.”

“Anything else?”

“Nothing else.”

Abdul brought the tea very quickly and set it down. Abdul was serving very quickly today. He wasn’t pausing to chat with the tea-drinkers.

The white-haired man’s tea was getting cold, but he was still staring at the wall before him. Suddenly he bowed his head, buried his face in a handkerchief, and began to weep with great sobs.

All those sitting at the various tables stayed where they were, watching the white-haired man in silence.

“We ought to leave now,” Irfan said.

“Why?”

“I can endure defeat. I can’t endure sentimentality.”

But meanwhile the white-haired man suddenly stopped in the midst of his sobbing. He wiped his eyes with the handkerchief, and began to drink his tea in silence.

After this brief display of emotion, the Shiraz again fell silent. The man who had been drinking tea and reading a newspaper, again became absorbed in drinking tea and reading the newspaper. The man who had been staring into space ordered more tea, went over and picked up a newspaper lying on a nearby table, then sat down again and began to leaf through it. The group around the table by the kitchen, who had been talking, had fallen absolutely silent for a long moment; then they again began to talk in low voices.

Salamat and Ajmal entered, and the moment they entered the silent atmosphere of the Shiraz was somehow disturbed. Staring at Zakir and Irfan, they scraped their chairs noisily over the floor as they sat down, and Salamat said sharply, “Order tea.”

Salamat looked intently first at him, then at Irfan: “You people are responsible for this defeat.”

Neither made any response.

“Irfan! I’m telling you, you’re responsible for this defeat. And you, Zakir.”

“How?” Zakir asked innocently.

Salamat said wrathfully, “You imperialist stooge, do you play innocent and ask how? Haven’t you thought about what you’re teaching to boys? The histories of kings. Opium pills! Yes, and your father is responsible, who every day feeds my father an opium pill of religion! Even today he fed him a pill. Today my father went and learned the lesson of patience from your holy-minded father! He says, ‘God is with the patient.’ I said, ‘Old man, these magic spells can’t save you any more. The day of reckoning has come.’”

Irfan looked peacefully at the enraged Salamat and said, “So it seems that today you’ve accepted your father as your father?”

Salamat glared at Irfan. “Are you mocking me?”

“No, I’m expressing satisfaction.”

A young man from the table near the kitchen stood up and came over. He went over to stand near Salamat and asked venomously, “Salamat Sahib! I heard your speech at your party’s rally, when you supported Bangladesh. Why are you sorry today?”

“Sorry?” Salamat said angrily. “Why should I be sorry? I’m warning the imperialist pimps that they’ve lost the game.”

“In other words, Pakistan has lost the game? Is that what you want to say?” The young man’s eyes were bloodshot with fury.

The manager guessed from a distance the deteriorating situation, and hurried over. He began trying to pacify the young man: “Please sit down at your table and drink your tea.”

“No, just let me ask what my friend here really wants!”

The manager seized the young man’s arm and managed to take him back to his own table. Then he came and said, “Salamat Sahib, please don’t say such things today. People’s hearts are very heavy today.”

“Which people’s hearts?” Salamat asked, grinding his teeth.

“Look, I’m not going to argue with you.” The manager, as he walked away, called to Abdul. “Abdul! Bring tea for Salamat Sahib.”

No answer came from Abdul. He had already arrived at the table with a tray of tea.

“Abdul!” Irfan said, getting up. “This tea will go on my tab.” And before Salamat could say anything, Zakir and Irfan had both left the Shiraz.

Outside the Shiraz, there was a crowd standing on the footpath. They were having a very hot argument, and more people were collecting. What were they arguing about? He couldn’t hear. He only heard one word repeated again and again—“traitors.” And then suddenly two young men fell on each other.

He and Irfan went on, without stopping, without paying any attention, and walked in silence for some time. Then he said, “Salamat was right.”

“Why was he right?” Irfan looked at him angrily.

“He was right that I’m responsible for this defeat.”

Irfan glared at him, then said, “Zakir! You aren’t by any chance trying to become Gamal Abdel Nasser?”

“No, how could I do that? How could a teacher, cowardly and fearful, become Gamal Abdel Nasser?”

“Then?”

“It’s like this, Irfan: defeat too is a trust. But today in this country they’re all putting the blame on each other, and they’ll do it even more as time goes on. Everyone’s trying, and will keep on trying, to prove that he’s not responsible. I thought that someone ought to take up this trust.”

“Up to this point your thinking is correct, but there’s one more thing to think about.”

“What?”

“This: that to take up the burden of this trust, a man ought at least to be Gamal Abdel Nasser.”

He fell into thought, then said, “You’re right. The trust is great. The one who takes it up is small.”

After this a long silence. They walked for a long time, together but absolutely separate. Then Irfan suddenly stopped. “All right, yar, I’m going.”

“Where? You’re on night duty.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” And immediately he turned down another street.

•

Left alone, he breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps not only Irfan, but also he himself, needed to be alone now. Perhaps each of them inwardly felt the other a burden, and wanted to be alone. In such a long friendship, for the first time they had become a burden to each other.

He went on walking, without thinking where he was going. He stopped at a cigarette-seller’s shop. Without meeting the shopkeeper’s eyes, he bought a packet of cigarettes and went on. Normally he ought to have stopped at Nazira’s shop on leaving his house, and bought his cigarettes there, for that had been his custom; but today he had passed by on the road, avoiding Nazira’s eyes as though he owed him money.

With a cigarette in his lips he went on, until he passed by Jinnah Garden and paused. Why am I wearing out my legs for no reason? With this thought, he turned off the road into the garden. Following one path after another, he reached the wide lawn with flower beds and stone benches. But instead of sitting on a bench, he chose to sit on the lawn, with his legs stretched out. Then he cast a glance around. For a long way, there was no one. Today the garden is quite empty. And as this thought came to him he realized that he hadn’t been roaming around without a purpose. He had

been searching for some solitary corner. But why? For the same reason Khvajah Sahib had wanted one? This thought startled him. As if I'd been wandering everywhere all day, so I could find a solitary corner and—No, Irfan is right. Defeat can be endured, sentimentality cannot. But then another wave came and swept him away with it. Any public show of tearfulness is vulgar. To release one's emotions in solitude is the proper human thing to do. What's the harm of it? Afterwards, a man feels lighter. And he tried once more to feel the disaster fully and intensely. For a long time he sat there and tried to let emotion overpower him. Then he lay down and closed his eyes. But despite all his efforts, the only emotion he could summon up was a kind of listlessness.

"Fellow! What are you doing here? Are you asleep?"

"No." He jumped up. Afzal stood before him.

"Then what are you doing?" Afzal asked, sitting down on the grass.

"Yar, I didn't know what to do; when I couldn't tell what to do I came here. Here at least there's solitude. Why are you here?"

"I always come here from time to time, to visit the flowers. The flowers, and the trees. They're good people, they're all my friends."

"To visit the flowers? Today?"

"Yes, today." Afzal was silent, then said, "Yar, this morning my eyes opened before daybreak. I thought I ought to see how the morning of a defeat dawns. I opened the window of my room and looked out. I kept looking for a long time. Outside there was nothing at all. I closed the window and pulled the sheet over my head and went to sleep. I slept till the afternoon, and finally my grandmother shook me and made me wake up. Yar! Have I ever told you about my grandmother?"

"No."

"When we left it was the rainy season, there was a flood. On the one hand riots, on the other hand a flood. But my grandmother wouldn't leave the land. My mother explained to her that we were leaving because of the flood, and when it went down we'd go back. My simple grandmother was taken in. But those words stuck in her mind. Every few days she demands, 'Daughter! The flood must have gone down, take me back.'"

"Really?" He burst out laughing.

"Absolutely. Even now she thinks that when the flood goes down we'll go back. So today she shook me and woke me up. I got up, rubbing my eyes. She fed me, most lovingly. Then she said, 'My child! The flood must

surely have gone down. So take me back!' I stared at her face. It came to me to say 'My dear little granny! If the flood has gone down back there, it has risen over here. How can we go back?' My heart told me not to say it—she would go on to ask more questions. I decided to go out. Then I left, and as I went out I thought that today, rather than meeting disgusting people, it would be better to go and visit the trees and flowers." He fell silent, cast a glance around, then said, "The sun is good right now, but it's going down." Sadness came into his voice. "The December sun is good, but it sets so soon."

Afzal is right, he thought. When a man's heart and mind are empty, and his power to think and feel is taken away, then he ought to go and sit politely in the company of trees, and chat with the flowers. Unquestionably the trees are wise, and the flowers make good conversation. He looked at Afzal, who was paying no attention to him and was staring at the trees in the distance. His glance too began to travel along with Afzal's, and settled on the trees in the distance. Both their bodies were here, their eyes on the distant trees. Their hearts and minds too were drawn that way.

"Fellow! Listen." Afzal addressed him in a confidential tone.

He came back with difficulty from the world of the trees, and didn't look happy to be back. "Yes, what is it?"

"Yar! Shouldn't I take the management of Pakistan into my own hands?"

"What?" He gave Afzal a strange look.

"Yar, this is what I've thought of. If I find two virtuous people and they become my arms, then I can take on this responsibility. One is you, and Irfan can be added as the other. Sometimes he says disgusting things, but still he's a good person. If you two give me a hand, I can make Pakistan beautiful again. Yar, these ugly ones have spoiled the face of Pakistan, they're very disgusting people."

He laughed somewhat bitterly, and said nothing.

"Fellow, you have no faith in me." Afzal's mood changed.

"I have faith in you, I have no faith in myself."

"You don't trust yourself? Yar, among those disgusting people we are the only beautiful ones." He paused, then said, "You know that some acres are going to be allotted to me."

"I've been hearing that for a long time."

"I didn't take it seriously either. But now it's happening. The allotment is about to come through, I've prepared my map. One acre will be used for

beds of roses.”

“A whole acre?—What’s the point?”

“Yar, in Pakistan the flowers have been growing fewer, that’s why people have been growing uglier and hatred has kept on spreading. I thought I ought to save those bastards’ faces from growing distorted. So the scheme is that one acre will be beds of roses, two acres will be a mango orchard. Yar, the truth is that listening to the voices of those disgusting people has ruined my hearing. If there’s a mango orchard, then at least we can hear the call of the koel. How about it?”

“It’s a good idea.”

“All right, then get ready, we have to make Pakistan beautiful.”

At that very moment there was a rumbling in the sky, loud enough to burst the eardrums. He and Afzal both raised their eyes to the sky. “Air-raid!” burst from his lips.

“Air-raid,” Afzal said with surprise. “The siren didn’t sound.”

“Our sirens have been silent all day.”

Afzal stared at the sky. Gradually the atmosphere grew still. Afzal drew a breath of satisfaction. “Yar, I was afraid a bomb would fall, and all these flowers—” He fell silent.

“And you say that we have to make Pakistan beautiful.”

“Yar, can’t we stop the wars?”

Afzal asked the question with so much innocence that he burst out laughing.

“Zakir, you’re laughing. I’m asking the question seriously. Can’t we stop the wars?”

“No.”

“Fellow, you just don’t know me. But I need two virtuous people—Zakir!”

“Yes.”

“Will you be my arm?”

•

Again a low rumbling began in the sky. The sound grew louder and louder until it became an ear-splitting roar. Today, ever since the late afternoon, the attacking planes had been flying very low. They came swiftly and passed on, without dropping bombs. He glanced at the ticking clock before him. It

was almost 7:30. So apparently this was the last air raid. And he remembered that in ’65, the night of the cease-fire had been just like this—I abruptly awoke from sleep. The walls of the room were trembling, the windows and doors rattling. I looked at the clock. Twelve o’clock was striking. I was stupefied and frightened. At that time the cannons ought to have fallen silent. Had the cease-fire agreement failed, and war broken out afresh? The guns were thundering so loudly that the roaring and thundering of the past sixteen nights paled by comparison. But suddenly the roar and thunder stopped. Perfect silence, unfathomable stillness. Just a moment ago there was such a roar and thunder that the earth trembled and the walls quivered, and now in a moment such silence, such stillness. I was shaking. Perhaps a cease-fire is more terrifying than a war. I had emerged from one terror and had taken refuge in another terror—in a deeper terror. Then all the rest of the night I couldn’t sleep.

The minute hand of the clock, after a long terrifying journey of twenty-nine minutes, has arrived at the thirtieth minute and is stuck there. The sky is silent. So the Indian planes have shown their power for the last time and gone back. So the cease-fire has taken effect. I get up and open the window, peer out and look at the sky, run my gaze around for a long distance in every direction. I don’t see anything. The atmosphere is dark, the whole city is immersed in darkness. Afzal was right. There’s nothing at all outside.

I close the window and grope through the dark room to my bed and lie down. There’s nothing at all outside. Afzal was right. Everything is the same outside. Then where has all this taken place?

. . . “Then where does this smoke come from?”* From where? From inside me? But where am I myself? Here, or there? There in the ruined city? And the ruined city? But I myself am the ruined city. “It’s as if my heart is the city of Delhi.”* When it falls and when a man is destroyed, when sturdy young men become hunchbacks and the keepers of the house tremble. “And when we had obtained your promise that there would be no bloodshed between us, and our own would not be exiled from their own land. Then you swore all this, and you are a witness to it. Then you are the one who murders your own, and exiles a group of your own from the land.”* “You murdered, then you were murdered. You exiled, then you were exiled.”* And then when terrors camped on the roads, and the gates of the streets were closed, and the sound of the grindstone no longer came from

the houses, and the cooking stoves grew cold. “And when I was in the Fort of Susa, it happened that Hanani, who was one of my brothers, came, and I asked him about the remnant of the survivors, and also about Jerusalem. He said, ‘The remnant who survived are suffering trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.’”* “Jahanabad is a wasteland. Don’t consider it an exaggeration—all, rich and poor, have left. Those who stayed were forced to leave. The feudal landlords, those with special Company pensions, the rich, the artisans—not one is left. I fear to write the story in detail. The servants of the Red Fort suffer violence, and are caught up in investigations and detentions. I sit in my own house, and cannot go out the door. Someone might come to see me, but who is left in the city? House after house is lightless—‘A river of blood is flowing; if only that were all!’”* Restlessly he stood up, then sat down. In the darkness he strained his eyes to see around him. Where am I? Words said where? By whom? Stories told when? My brain is seething like a cooking-pot over the fire. Then he thought it would be better if he sat down to write in his diary. After all, I never swore to write in my diary only during wartime! And I certainly ought to record in my diary the events of today. He turned the flame of the lantern up higher, and began to write.

DECEMBER 18

. . . The Red Fort rang with silence. I went to the tomb of Hare-bhare Shah. The mad faqir wasn’t there. I searched for him, but he was nowhere to be found.

Delhi is now a ruined city. “Lanes that were like leaves from a painter’s album”* have been laid waste. So many leaves have blown away with the wind, so many others have been utterly erased. So many houses are lightless, reduced to rubble.

. . . I left this desolation and set out on the road to Lucknow. When I arrived near that city, I heard that the city had been turned upside down, and Navab Hazrat Mahal had left the city along with her devoted companions and set out for the forests of Nepal. The English army was pursuing her. Hunters stalked her like dogs, sniffing for her scent from city to city, forest to forest.

I was astonished. What had the queen been thinking of, not to surrender? I grieved over the queen's imprudence and went on.

Passing by Jhansi, I asked a traveler, "Brother! Is there any news of Jhansi?" He replied sorrowfully, "The Maharani gave her life on the battlefield. Jhansi's game is over."

I went on. I passed by so many cities. I found every city in disorder. I saw that every post lay unguarded. There was very little water in the Narbada, I crossed the river easily. When I crossed it and went on, I found dense forest.

A MEETING WITH TANTIYA TOPI

. . . Passing through the forest, I ran into Tantiya Topi. In this dense frightening forest he seemed like a lion in a thicket. I respectfully told him how things were in the cities.

"Delhi has already fallen."

"So what?" he answered carelessly.

"Lucknow too has been overthrown."

"So what?"

"The Rani of Jhansi has been killed. Jhansi is done for."

"So what?"

"India has lost the war."

"So what?"

"Now there's no point in fighting. The sensible thing would be to surrender. Furthermore, the rainy season is over. The Narbada has very little water. There's no longer any obstacle in the path of the English army."

Tantiya Topi looked at me intently. He replied, "My friend! Formerly I was fighting to save the throne of India, now I'm fighting to save the soul of India. I've lost that fight, I won't lose this one." He fell silent. He stared at me, and said, "Are you a Muslim?"

"Praise be to God, I'm a servant of Islam."

"So I see."

"What do you mean?"

"Friend, what I mean is obvious. You Muslims are fighting only for the throne. And where are you even fighting? I know what used to happen in the Red Fort of Delhi."

What used to happen in the Fort of Delhi? Now, and formerly. At the hands of brothers, brothers—the Mughals' rusty swords. But Prince Firoz Shah—and Bakht Khan. In what forest is he? Is he too wandering in the forests of Nepal? So many people have left Dhaka and staggered and stumbled half-dead into Nepal. The forests of Nepal have a wide-open embrace. Those who obstinately refuse to bow their heads, and come here. Those who save their lives by fleeing, and come here. The dogs began to bark. My mind began to be confused. My sentences keep growing more and more disconnected. The dogs are barking exactly as they were barking last night. For them, there's no difference.

•

He stopped writing and stood up. Opening the window, he looked out. In the two-story house opposite them there was light. Electric lights were burning in every room. This light seemed strange to him. He wanted to see how deep and black the night was.

He came back, and as he lay down on his bed he glanced at the clock. He was surprised. It's still only ten o'clock? Oh. And it seems that half the night has passed. Oh God! This night is longer than even the wartime nights.

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NINE

KHVAJAH Sahib had just that moment arrived and sat down. “Have you heard anything?”

“Yes, I did find out something.” Today there was a glimmer of hope in Khvajah Sahib’s voice.

“Really? What did you find out?”

“Somebody has come from over there. He says that he saw Karamat in Bangkok.”

“In Bangkok?”

“Maulana Sahib, what’s surprising about that? From such a Doomsday, everyone slipped out however he could. So many of them are hiding in India, so many have gone through India to Nepal. Many of them crossed the eastern border and came out in Burma. Some went to Rangoon, others reached Bangkok. So this man told me that he had come by way of Bangkok. There he met Karamat.”

“Who is this man?”

“Oh, you know Muhammad Din from my Amritsar, don’t you? It’s someone he knows. I got this man’s address from him. He’s in Sialkot. So today I’m going to Sialkot.”

“Go, God will help you.”

“Maulana Sahib! What’s your opinion? I’m convinced that Karamat is alive and will come back.”

Abba Jan reflected, then said, “It’s not beyond the power of His mercy. It’s even happened that a man has been ordered hanged, and then has been saved. Firm faith is necessary.”

“Maulana Sahib, by God’s grace, my faith is very firm. It’s true that I don’t place much trust in holy men and faqirs. But there was one faqir who impressed me. It was Muhammad Din who took me to visit him. He looked at my face. He said, ‘You’re worried.’ I said, ‘I’m indeed worried.’ He said, ‘Don’t be worried—pray. He’s alive, but in trouble.’ Then, sir, he told me a

prayer to say forty times every day after the sunset prayers. Maulana Sahib! Believe me, after I had been saying it for only a week, I heard about this Sialkot man."

"God's Word is very powerful."

"Well, sir, I'm going today to Sialkot."

Zakir stared at Khvajah Sahib. He remembered what had happened last month. Last month too, Khvajah Sahib had come like this one morning, full of hope. That time he had heard of a man who had come back to Karachi, who had, in escaping from the conflagration, seen Karamat at the Burmese border. And Khvajah Sahib had wandered all over Karachi searching for him.

"Maulana Sahib!" Khvajah Sahib spoke thoughtfully. "I must be under a curse. Just look, sir, I had two sons. One turned bad. One was lost—the obedient one. Only the Lord can bring him back. While the worthless one is grinding my heart into powder. That wretch Salamat, do you know what he says? He says, 'The Bengalis have won freedom.' I said, 'Bastard son! Get out of my house.' He said, 'I'm going to America.' I said, 'Go to hell.'"

Once he had mentioned Salamat, Khvajah Sahib usually went on and on, but soon he remembered that he had to go to Sialkot, and rose to take his leave. The moment he went out, Ammi entered. "Well, what was Khvajah Sahib saying? Has he had some news of Karamat?"

Abba Jan answered with a certain hesitation, "He says that a man has come from over there, and has seen Karamat in Bangkok."

"What else does the man say?"

"He won't find out any more until he sees him in person. The man is in Sialkot. Today Khvajah Sahib is going to Sialkot. We'll see."

"But surely, the man is a stranger. Why would he tell a lie? He must have seen Karamat, since he says so."

"Yes. But how can we tell?" Abba Jan fell silent. Then he said, "In any case, we ought to hope for His favor, no matter what."

"Yes! I pray that the poor boy comes back, no matter how. Otherwise, poor Khvajah Sahib will be more dead than alive." As she spoke, Ammi sighed. "And then, my own heart is in the same state. My heart is so full of suffering! Khvajah Sahib is worried about *one* of his loved ones. I have a whole family, and no news of them." She stopped, then said, "Oh, what a dream I had last night, about Batul! She was in a wretched state, with her hair dirty and matted. I was combing her hair, and saying, 'Why, your hair

is full of lice.’” Her voice trailed off, then she covered her face with the end of her dupattah. Her eyes filled.

Abba Jan bowed his head. Then he sighed, and said, “Now it’s time for me to die.”

“Abba Jan?” He looked at him with a start.

“Yes, son! Now it’s time for me to die. I’ve seen a lot. And what I should never have seen—I’ve seen that too. I don’t have the strength to see any more.”

“Conditions are improving. In the future they’ll improve even more.”

“But for how long?” Abba Jan paused, then said, “Son, if conditions improve, it means nothing. People’s deeds have to improve.” Ammi seemed not to have heard. Her mind was busy elsewhere. “Son, what were you saying that day, that Sabirah has gotten a job in the radio?”

“Sabirah? I don’t know, Surendar wrote me about it.” At the sudden mention of Sabirah he was somewhat rattled.

“Then, son, write her a letter.”

“A letter! To Sabirah?” He couldn’t understand what Ammi was saying.

“Why, I’ve heard that those who had family in India have secretly gone to join them.”

“What are you talking about, Zakir’s mother!” Abba Jan said with a touch of anger.

“*Ai hai*, what do I know? I’ve heard it.”

“Those who told you are as good at telling as you are at listening!”

“*Ai hai*, after all, when their houses are destroyed they must surely go somewhere! When people feel oppressed in a land, they rise up and leave it. They don’t stop to ask where they’re going.”

“But that land had already grown oppressive before.”

“Yes, once that land was oppressive, now this land has grown oppressive!”

Abba Jan, hearing this, fell into thought. Then he said, “God the Most High made the land wide and open, but in the hands of man it grows narrow and oppressive.”

“Well, what I was saying”—Ammi came back again to her subject —”was that Sabirah must have some news. While we’re sitting here with no news at all! People in India have more news than we do. So please just write a letter to Sabirah.”

Should I write a letter to Sabirah? Now, after so long? He fell into perplexity. But very soon he realized that he couldn't write a letter. "Ammi, the mail service to India is shut down. How can I write a letter?"

"*Ai*, yes, I didn't even think of that." She paused. Then she said, "But son, those who want to write letters are still writing them. They say that the letters are reaching India through London. *Ai*, son! Don't you have some friend in London? Send a letter to him. He'll send it on from there to India."

He again fell into perplexity.

•

"Yar! I want to write a letter."

"To whom?"

"To Sabirah."

"To Sabirah?" Irfan looked at him attentively.

"Yes, to Sabirah."

"Now, after so much time has passed?"

"Yar, Ammi has got it into her head that Sabirah in India ought to have news about my Khalah Jan. So now she's demanding that I write a letter to Sabirah."

"And this demand is just according to your desire." Irfan smiled.

According to my desire? He fell into thought. What's my desire now? Now when so much time has passed and we've grown so far apart. Between her and me time and space have both interposed themselves. They've allied themselves against us. How much time has passed since we walked on the same land, since a single sky spread over both our heads.

The days went on passing. Days, months, years. It seemed that the door back had been closed forever. Those who had been lost would remain lost forever. Once in a while somebody would suddenly appear, and people would look at him in astonishment: Really, so somebody can actually escape and come out of there? Then they'd ask how he got out, and how he came to the city. And he'd tell how he hid for three days in a burned-out house, crouching in the ruins, hungry and thirsty, holding his breath. Then how he furtively crossed the border and reached Calcutta. "Then, sir, from there I boarded the Howrah Express. I thought that when I reached Aligarh, I'd surely find somebody I knew on the platform. I'd recognize someone, or someone would recognize me. Yar! When the train stopped at Aligarh, my

compartment was right in front of the tea stall, and our same old Khan was sitting there."

"You got down there?"

"No, yar! How could I have gotten down? I was afraid someone would recognize me! I sat there holding my breath, hiding my face. When the train began to move and pulled out of the station, and Aligarh vanished from before my eyes, I felt restored to life! Well, sir, then I didn't stop for anything until I got to Delhi. I got down from the train and went straight to the Jama Masjid. When I reached there I was absolutely penniless. I said to myself, Well my dear fellow, now you'll be forced to tell someone or other of your plight. In the mosque I approached a number of people, but then drew back. At last I saw a fine-looking old gentleman. His face looked so sympathetic and kindly. I went and sat down near him. Quietly I told him where I was coming from, and then I burst into tears. He passed his hand over my head affectionately, and took me home. I thought I'd stay at his house for one night, then borrow the money for the fare and set out again the next morning. But, yar, my resolve faltered."

"Why? Did you fall for someone?"

"No, yar! The truth is that just then 'Pakizah' was showing there. I said to myself, My dear fellow, now that you've come to Delhi, you ought to see Meena Kumari before you go! So I stopped over for one day to see 'Pakizah.'"

"Is it a good film?"

"Absolutely first-class."

"Did you see only the one film?"

"As many days as I stayed in Delhi, I did nothing else but see films. Finally the old gentleman said, 'Young sir! If the police get wind of this, they'll be here on the run. You'll be arrested, and we'll be dragged into it as well. It's time for you to make yourself scarce.' So the very next day I boarded the Frontier Mail and came straight to Amritsar. By hook or by crook I managed to cross the border, and here I am in Pakistan."

Thus the occasional person, after making his way in secrecy through town after town, arrived by way of India. Others who emerged from the land of disaster set out for Nepal, and contrived to come from there to here. Others left through Burma, and endured hardship and pain on their way back. Many returned after suffering imprisonment in India. So they straggled back, one by one. The prisoners and the missing kept returning. It

seemed that every single one had come back, or perhaps as though no one had gone, or was lost, or was lacking. How quickly wounds heal, and empty places are filled! Moving around in the city, who could imagine that some people had gone away and not come back, and some households were still waiting for them to return? Khvajah Sahib was still wandering in the mists of hope and despair. Even now he still came every day to see Abba Jan. They still asked each other the same question, “Is there any news?” As though this question had been asked for an eternity, and would be asked for an eternity to come.

“Maulana Sahib! Is there any news of your relatives?”

“No, my friend.”

“None of the new arrivals has brought any word?”

“No.”

“No letter from anywhere?”

“No.”

“It’s astonishing! So many people have come, none of them has brought any word!”

“Is there any news of your son?”

“Yes, Maulana Sahib. Thanks to your good wishes, there’s some news.”

“What news?”

“Maulana Sahib, I had Maulana Sana’ullah read the omens.* He reads omens extremely well. The omens were that Karamat is well and will return. And sir, the astrologers say the same thing. That astrologer Nur Din, you know? I went to him. He drew a full-scale horoscope and showed it to me: ‘Khvajah, sir, look with your own eyes. At this moment your son’s star is in the house of Saturn. It’s about to emerge. Just wait and see. Suddenly one day he’ll arrive.’”

“God is the Causer of Causes. It could happen that way.”

“I’m confident that it’ll be just that way. And furthermore, today I’m going to Lyallpur.”

“Why?”

“Well, one of my brother-in-law’s brothers lives there. His son-in-law has arrived from over there. My brother-in-law told me that the boy has seen Karamat. In fact he even says that Karamat has given him some letter. So today I’m going to Lyallpur. Let’s see what’s written in the letter.” He rose to leave.

Khvajah Sahib went out, and Ammi entered: “Why, these omens which Khvajah Sahib is having read—it occurs to me, why don’t we too have the omens read?”

“Zakir’s mother! God the Most High commands, and then things happen. Place your trust in Him.”

“There’s no telling when He’ll give the command!” Ammi said angrily.

“He keeps His own counsel. We sit waiting for His command. When the command comes, we set out.” He paused, sighed, “Now it’s time for me to die.”

“*Ai hai*, do you always have to keep talking about death? Is this some new madness that’s come over you?”

“Zakir’s mother! Remember Hazrat Ali’s saying, that you and your desires are guests in this world. Zakir’s mother, you ought to keep this saying in mind. Guests don’t stay forever.”

Ammi listened indifferently to Abba Jan’s words, and turned her attention toward Zakir. “Zakir! No answer to your letter has come from Delhi?”

“Ammi, it’ll come. The mail reaches there very slowly, and comes from there even more slowly.”

“*Ai* son! After all, how many days does a letter take to go and come? It’s been quite a while since you wrote.”

“Ammi, between India and Pakistan the mails are very much disrupted. Some letters arrive, some don’t arrive.”

“Why son, then write another letter to your friend.”

“I’ve written, Ammi. I expect the answer to my letter will be coming soon.”

•

“Yar, I’ve already written two letters. Surendar hasn’t answered. I don’t know what’s the matter.”

“Then write to her directly.”

“To her?” He fell into thought.

The door of the Shiraz opened and Afzal entered. “Yar! I’ve heard that that mouse has come back.”

“Who?”

“Zavvar.”

“You’ve just heard? He’s been here for ages. He’s been posted here, and promoted.” There was a little sarcasm in Irfan’s tone.

“Yar, forgive him. Among us all, he’s the man most to be pitied.”

“Most to be pitied?” Irfan eyed Afzal with exasperation.

“Yes, yar! I feel very sorry for him. He deserves pity.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s joined the Civil Service, and is rising through the ranks.”

“In truth, he’s very much to be pitied,” Irfan said bitterly.

“Yar, can’t you give me some liquor? I’m very thirsty.”

“We can only give you tea.”

“Tea? Tea is useless. Only liquor washes out the filth inside.” With these words, he pulled some notes from his pocket and counted them. “Yar, I’m only short ten rupees. Irfan! Get out a five.” Looking toward Zakir, he said, “My fellow here will give five.”

He and Irfan took five-rupee notes from their pockets and handed them over to Afzal. Afzal at once stood up. But then he remembered something. Sitting down again, he said, “Yar! Those two mice who always stood up on their tails—I want to say a prayer for them.”

“That they’ll stay in America and not come back!”

“No, yar. Don’t ask me to call down curses. Salamat and Ajmal weren’t that bad. After they’d been drinking, they said good things. Yar, why did they go off to America? I was making arrangements for them here. I’m about to have some acres allotted to me. One acre will be given over to beds of roses. One acre will be only for rain-bugs.”

“Rain-bugs?” Irfan looked at him sarcastically.

“Fellow! Be quiet! You won’t be able to understand this. In the rainy season I roam around very anxiously. There don’t seem to be any rain-bugs here. There ought to be rain-bugs. We have to make Pakistan beautiful.” Then, changing his tone, he addressed them both: “Listen! You two will stay with me. This is my command. I, and you two.”

“And the rain-bugs,” Irfan interrupted.

“Yes, and the rain-bugs. In beautiful Pakistan there will be only beautiful people.”

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TEN

AMIDST a roar of slogans and a rain of bricks, he crossed the street and knocked at the closed, curtained door of the Shiraz. He knocked once, a second time, a third time. Abdul pulled the curtain slightly aside and looked out, then opened one panel of the door a little. “Zakir-ji, come in quick.”

Inside in the half-darkness, looking around at the empty tables and chairs, he made out the corner where Irfan was sitting alone, drinking tea.

“Yar, that time has come again.”

“Even a worse one, for when a time comes back it’s always grown worse. But how did you get here? I didn’t think you’d be able to make it today.”

“Well, I did. In Delhi, among all the venerable elders of steadfast habits there was one who came to his friend’s house every evening at the same time, knocked on the door, and visited for a while. When the Rebellion of ’57 came, all the roads were closed. This man of steadfast habits left his house, crawled with great difficulty through trenches and gutters, and somehow managed to arrive at his friend’s house at the regular time.”

“Yes, we too are among those who keep the steadfast habits of ’57.”

“Although that time has not yet come.”

“Yes, it hasn’t yet come.”

There was another knock on the door, and again Abdul dashed over to pull the curtain slightly aside and look out through the glass. Then, as before, he opened one panel of the door a little. “Afzal-ji, hurry.” After letting Afzal in, he again closed the door.

In the half-darkness, after glancing around at the empty tables and chairs, Afzal focused his attention on the table where the two were sitting. “*Ai* people! Do you see that the signs of mischief are again showing themselves?”

“Yes, we’ve heard and we’ve seen and we’ve confirmed it,” Irfan said with a light sarcasm in his tone.

Afzal, pleased, patted him on the back. “You’re a good man. It’s only when you deny me that you’re disgusting.”

“Yar, is something going to happen again?” Zakir asked, with a certain thought in his mind.

“Yes, Salamat has come back,” Irfan announced, ignoring his question.

“What did you say? That mouse has come back again?” Afzal was startled. “And the other mouse?”

“Both have come back, and they’ve turned into Muslims.”

“Not really?”

“Absolutely. Both revolutionaries stick pious caps on their heads and go to the mosque to offer prayers.”

“Really?” He was still astonished. “This is indeed a cause for anxiety!”

Abdul brought the tea and set it down, then stood there. “What’s all this, sir, that’s happening?”

“What you see,” Irfan replied.

“Well, sir, it started very suddenly. No one had the slightest suspicion that it might start again.”

“Abdul!” Afzal glared at him. “You too have become a mouse.”

Abdul asked Afzal an abrupt question. “Afzal Sahib-ji! You tell me, what will come of it? What’s going to happen?”

Afzal placed his finger on his lips. “Abdul, be silent. I have been commanded not to speak.”

From the distance came the Fire Brigade’s siren.

“There’s a fire somewhere.”

Silence—everyone was listening intently to the Fire Brigade’s siren.

“Friends! I want to ask your permission for one thing,” Afzal said with such gravity that he, Irfan, and Abdul all three listened closely.

“Do you know what Baba Farid said to the Khvajah of Kalyar? If you don’t know, then listen. The Khvajah sent to the Baba an account of the disgusting people of the city. The Baba sent him a reply, ‘Oh steadfast one, Kalyar is your goat. I give you full authority. If you wish, drink its milk; if you wish, eat its meat.’ Then the Khvajah stood before the mosque and said, ‘*Ai* mosque, bow down!’ The mosque obeyed his order and bowed down so low that hundreds were crushed to death in its ruins. Then the plague spread. From all the houses, numerous funeral processions set out at the same time.”

Afzal, after telling this story, fell silent. He stared intently at all the three faces. Then he asked solemnly, “Friends, what do you say? What shall I do with this goat? Shall I drink its milk, or eat its meat?”

Irfan ignored Afzal’s whole speech and addressed Zakir: “Zakir, how is your father now?”

“He’s somewhat better, but he talks strangely, as if he had entirely given up on life.”

“It doesn’t matter, that’s simply the way people talk in old age.”

•

Genealogies, crumbling manuscripts, termite-eaten books with yellowed pages, old notes and papers, all kinds of ancient prescriptions, prayers, amulets—Abba Jan, with his spectacles on, read over every single sheet carefully, and confided them to him.

“*Ai hai*, what a packet of papers you’ve opened! You might at least have waited until you were a little better! Remember that in old age, when a man once falls down, he has trouble standing up again.”

“Zakir’s mother, I’m putting my affairs in order. When a man rises to depart, he should first straighten his garments.” He paused, then said, “Thanks be to God, my garments are not too dusty. No property, no money. If there was any, it was left behind back there. There are only these few ancient pages.”

“Oh, your mind is full of foolish notions. It’s not good to be constantly talking about death.”

“Zakir’s mother! What is there left now that’s good to talk about? Don’t you see what’s happening in Pakistan?” As he spoke, he picked up a book stained with mold. He opened it and looked inside, then handed it to him and said, “It’s a collection of Hazrat Sajjad’s prayers. Keep it carefully.” He stopped and thought for a moment, then said, “A questioner asked, ‘Oh best of those who offer prayer! In what state did the morning find you?’ He replied, ‘I swear by the Provider, the morning found me tormented by the Umayyids.’” As he spoke, Abba Jan grew sad, and said, “Son, from then to now, that morning has continued.” He fell silent, then said, “And it will continue until the Appearance.” Then he again fell silent, and after a long moment added, “In fact, Hazrat Rabiah of Basra gave the same kind of answer. Someone asked, ‘What have you done since you came into the

world?’ She replied, ‘Lamented!’ Yes, that pure lady duly honored the claim of lamentation, for she constantly wept. What claim have I honored? I only sighed a few times, and then fell silent. Perhaps I wasn’t destined for any more lamentation than that. Anyone who remains alive now will honor the claim.” He sighed, and again began to fumble through the papers. “Take this, this is a cure for colic pain, written by Hakim Nabina. One small dose works better than a hundred injections. Keep it carefully.” And he gave him the fragile scrap of paper and again began going through his things.

From an inner compartment of a cloth bag came a small tablet of earth, and a rosary. “Zakir’s mother, you keep these. The tablet is made of the healing earth of Najaf, and the prayer-beads are made of clay from Karbala.” He touched both things to his eyes, kissed them, and handed them over to Ammi Jan.

From somewhere deep within the bag, under some papers, he brought out a bunch of keys. He looked at them closely, and said, “That day you were thinking about the keys to the mansion, and here they are.”

Her lined face brightened. “Truly?” She looked longingly at the bunch of keys. “Well, you wouldn’t believe, that day when you said you didn’t know where they were, my heart almost stopped beating. I thought my soul had left my body.” She paused, then said, “And the rust hasn’t gotten to them?”

Abba Jan examined the keys once more. “No, I didn’t let them get rusty. From now on, it’s up to Zakir.” Then he addressed him: “Son, these are the keys of a house to which we no longer have any right. And when did we ever have any right? The world, as Hazrat Ali has said, is a guesthouse. We and our desires are guests in it. Guests have no rights. Whatever the earth deigns to bestow on us guests, it’s a favor, and the earth has shown us great kindness indeed. These keys are a trust. Guard this trust, and remember the kindness shown by the earth we left, and this will be your greatest act of dutiful behavior.” As he spoke, suddenly his breath choked. He closed his eyes with the pain, and pressed his hand to his chest. Ammi at once jumped up anxiously, “Why, what’s happened?” She helped him to lie down. “Son, call the doctor!” Abba Jan opened his eyes. He made a sign to say no. Slowly, with the greatest difficulty, he said, “Hazrat Ali has come.”

Zakir was in a sort of trance; he stood watching, frozen in place like a statue. Abba Jan opened his eyes once more, looked toward him, and said as softly as a whisper, “Son, dawn is coming, recite the prayer for the Prophet.” Just then he moved convulsively, and his head fell back onto the

pillow. Ammi, who had been so distraught, suddenly stood motionless. Then she very slowly drew a sheet over the lifeless body. Then she collapsed on the floor, rested her head against the bed-frame, and began to sob.

•

“Fellow! Your father was a virtuous man,” Afzal said emotionally, embracing him. “When I looked at him I always thought he was a babe in arms who had grown a beard. He was really a child, absolutely innocent.”

“He truly was a good and noble man.” Irfan, who had been sitting silently for a long time, spoke soberly.

Afzal looked hard at Irfan. “Thank God you agree with me. There’s at least one man in the world of whom you have a good opinion!”

Then the silence spread. Then Afzal, thinking about something, said, “Zakir, you remember my grandmother, don’t you? The one who’s kept on saying, ever since she came here, ‘My child, the flood must have gone down, let’s go home.’”

“Yes, yes, what’s become of her?”

“She died.”

“Really? I’m very sorry—but how?”

“Just the way your father did. There’s no ‘how’ or ‘why’ about it. A person just dies, that’s all.”

“You’re right.”

“One day she said to me so pleadingly, ‘My child, so much time has passed. By now the flood must have gone down. Take me home.’ I said, ‘My dear granny, the flood has gone down over there, but it’s risen on this side.’ She looked at me with her wide-open eyes and said ‘All right,’ and died.”

•

“Son, last night I saw the Maulana Sahib in a dream. He was somewhat disturbed. I was concerned about the reason. Early in the morning I went to the cemetery. I read the Fatihah over his grave. The earth around his grave has subsided, you must arrange to have it filled up.”

“Yes sir, of course.”

“I told the watchman that for forty days there should be a candle lit every night by the grave. I left a packet of candles with him. Please check on it yourself too.”

“Yes sir, of course.”

“The Maulana Sahib was a man fit for Paradise, he never caused pain to anyone. He gave me so much strength. When my heart was restless at the separation from Karamat, I always came to him. He told me such stories, and such sayings of the Prophet, that my heart found peace.”

“Khvajah Sahib, Salamat has come back.”

“Who asked that ill-bred wretch to come back? The one I wait for doesn’t come. The one who caused me to thank God when he left, is back again, grinding my heart into powder. Son, he’s still just the way he was!”

“But I’ve heard that now he’s started offering his prayers.”

“Yes, son,” Khvajah Sahib sighed. “Formerly he used to teach us socialism, now he’s preaching Islam. Today he was giving his mother a lecture on Islam. She began to say something. I stopped her: ‘Count your blessings—you have sons. Right now your son is drunk. When he comes to his senses, then you can talk to him.’ She said, ‘When does he ever come to his senses?’ I said, ‘My good woman, are people ever in their senses nowadays? They’ve lost half the country, and haven’t come to their senses. He’s lost only a brother.’ Son, wasn’t I right?”

“Sir, what you said was true.”

“Son! What’s happened to people?” Khvajah Sahib’s tone abruptly changed.

“What do you mean?”

“You see what’s happening. There’s no telling what will come in the future! People’s blood is up, there’s no knowing what they’ll do. I’ve heard that marks have begun to appear on people’s houses.”

“Marks? What kind of marks?”

“Son, what world are you living in? Preparations are being made for war. Both sides have gathered so much ammunition that it only needs a fuse attached to it. This city will blaze up like dry fuel when a match is lit. May God have mercy.” Then he slid over toward me and said in a whisper, “Son, there’s one thing.”

“Sir?”

“I know that Pakistan is under the protection of the holy ones, but sometimes I feel afraid. There won’t be any damage to Pakistan?”

He was taken aback by this question. Khvajah Sahib saw his confusion. He said, “Son, I asked this very question of the Maulana Sahib. He answered every question from the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet. At this question, he fell silent. Silent in such a way that afterwards he fell silent forever.”

•

Among the letters of condolence, a letter from India. *Are*, it’s a letter from Surendar. He hurriedly slit the envelope open.

New Delhi

Dear Zakir,

If I haven’t answered your letters, the reason is that I wasn’t in the country. I was traveling in Europe for a long time. When I came back, I found your letters.

Your mother must be eager to have news of Sabirah’s family. But Sabirah hasn’t been able to get any word of them either. I mentioned your letters to her. She said nothing, she burst into tears. I was astonished. During those days when the worst news kept coming from Dhaka, I always found her calm. But today she burst into tears. I didn’t understand. But it made me sad to see her. My friend! May I say one thing? Don’t take it amiss. You’re a cruel person, or perhaps now that you’re in Pakistan you’ve become so.

Your,
Surendar

She burst into tears? He thought about it. It’s not strange she should weep, when she thinks about her mother and sister; and especially in such a situation of total ignorance about them. Whether they’re alive or dead. This explanation seemed very plausible to him, but immediately he felt a kind of restlessness, as though the explanation was not enough. When she heard about my letters she burst into tears! Why? Am I cruel? On what grounds?

Outside there was a knock on the door. He went to see. Afzal was standing there. “Friend, pardon me for coming at such an inconvenient time.”

“It’s amazing—you’ve begun to believe in proper and improper times!”

“I’m not like that—for me all times are one time; but you have your regular hours.”

“I have no choice; since I’m a slave to my job, I have to pay at least some attention to the time. Anyway, let’s drop the subject.”

“You want to ask why I’ve come at such an hour. Yar, I was alone and I began to feel uneasy, so I went out. Today I feel very fearful.”

“Fearful? Why?”

“Yar! I hear voices.”

“Voices? What kind of voices?”

“That’s what I don’t understand. Suddenly I was afraid there might be a hurricane, and a loud cry might come and carry me away.”*

“What? What are you saying? Are you crazy?” He looked closely at Afzal, who seemed very much terrified.

Afzal paid no attention to his words. He said, “In the morning when I got up, I was frightened and went to the mirror and looked at my face, for fear I __”

“Afzal!” he broke in. “It’s other people who look disgusting to you.”

“Yar, it happens sometimes that a man, finding others disgusting—well, some morning he discovers that his own face has changed. For the last couple of days I’ve somehow been fearful that I too might—that my face might—?”

“All right, stop this babbling. Here’s a cot, lie down on it and go to sleep.”

“Yes, yar.” He went at once and lay down on the cot. “I want to sleep.” As he spoke, he looked around, and said with surprise, “Yar! Your room seems like a cave to me.” He paused, thought, then said slowly, “All right, I’ve been awake for a long time. I’ll sleep for seven hundred years.” And his eyes gradually closed.

Voices, what kind of voices? he muttered. It’s just that Afzal’s ears ring. He finally grew quiet, but deep inside he was speaking. He’s a man who lives by delusions. Every day a new delusion. He hasn’t yet grown up. He thinks he’s a child, living with his granny in the atmosphere of his old town, where there were trees like those in my Rupnagar. Rupnagar, where the trees were such that when you looked at them you felt delusions arising, willy-nilly. And in his imagination he went back to Rupnagar.

•

In the full heat of the afternoon, they passed by the Black Temple, went on beyond Karbala, approached the Fort. Then they went on, and kept going on. They entered the Ravan Wood. Walking along, they hesitated. In the distance they could see the banyan tree. A solitary tree in the midst of the Ravan Wood, as though Ravan himself were standing there. They thought they could see something in the tree. Then Habib said fearfully, “Yar! What kind of voice was that?”

“Voice?” Bundu looked at Habib with astonishment.

“It came just a moment ago. Zakir! Didn’t you hear it?”

“No.”

“Listen!” Habib said, as though he was hearing the voice again.

They all three pricked up their ears. They stood obliviously in the blazing sun, listening for some far-off, unknown, mysterious voice. He himself didn’t hear anything. But the wonder and terror that spread over Habib and Bundu’s faces told him that they had heard something. Watching them, he too was gripped by wonder and terror.

“Run!” Habib said, as though the voice was coming close, ready to pounce on them. They ran away; he ran with them. He ran and ran. The distance back from the Ravan Wood became a long, perilous journey. The voice seemed to be following right behind him, and the town, his home, seemed to be miles away. He hadn’t even sighted the Black Temple yet! When he saw it, it seemed to be beyond the horizon. Habib and Bundu had gotten ahead of him. He was left behind alone, and kept on running. It was as though an age had passed, and he was still running. How long can I go on running? I’m winded, and my legs are already tired. And with my panting breath and tired legs I’m running all alone in this uninhabited forest. But for how long? How far away is my house? There’s no one to be seen anywhere around. As he ran, his gaze fell on the hillock. A man, is it a man? A wave of panic ran through him, and his feet weighed hundreds of pounds. Is it a man?

•

One of Afzal’s loud snores had woken him, or startled him. Had he been asleep? He glanced at Afzal, who was deep in sleep and snoring loudly. This man is really going to sleep for seven hundred years, he mumbled, sitting there and yawning. Then he fell into thought. Afzal was right. This

was indeed the time to have a long sleep. A man should go into a cave, apart from everyone, and sleep. And go on sleeping for seven hundred years. When he wakes up and comes out of the cave, then he'll see that the times have changed. And he has not changed. It's a good idea, it's better than getting up every morning and looking in the mirror, suspecting that his face has changed, and being tormented all day by the thought that his face is changing! When a man sees people changing all around him, such suspicions arise. Or it also happens that no suspicions arise, and then a man changes. How? How have they gone on changing? Those people, every one of whom believed that the others were changing, while he himself looked the same as before. Everyone looked at everyone else and was stupefied. "My dear friend! What's happened to you?"

"To me? Nothing's happened to me. But I can see that something's happened to you."

"My dear friend, nothing's happened to me. But I do see that your face __"

One tangled with another, the second tangled with a third. One clawed at another, the second clawed at a third. They all clawed at each other and were injured and deformed. I was afraid that I too—I came away. I should go into my cave and sleep. And keep sleeping until the times have changed.

. . . I'm in a forest. The forest keeps getting denser. How dense, how deep. And this town? No words of piety and peace, no rain of virtuous deeds. The sweet song of the flute has been broken off. No feeling of devotion anywhere. Land and water muddied and mingled. Men and women distraught. People have left their houses. "The way they'd flee from their houses during an earthquake."* The virtuous were oppressed. Women as pure as Savitri had their saris torn to shreds. Happy wives were turned into widows. Laps that had held babies were emptied. Children were at the point of death, with drooping heads and eyes rolled back. I was aghast: where was the protector of this town? A yogi with matted hair roared at me, "Fool! The protector of this town was the savior of all the world. But he has left this place and gone to the forest."

"For what reason?"

"Don't ask the reason. Look around, and understand. It happened that a horse with reins hanging loose, neighing, went into the forest. When he saw this, he lost all hope. Getting down from his chariot, he placed his flute on a

pitcher and broke it, smashed the pitcher into pieces, and went into the forest, searching for his brother."

When I heard this tale of disaster, I left the town. Traveling far, I came to a forest. An uninhabited forest. Unfathomable silence. Under a tree I saw his brother sitting, with ash-smeared limbs, on a deer-skin. His hair was knotted and tangled, his eyes closed, his mouth open—and from within his mouth a white snake thrust out its head. It came out hissing, and began to grow long, and kept growing longer and longer. It grew so long that its hood touched the waves of the distant, surging ocean. I saw with fear that the long white snake's body kept emerging from the wise man's mouth, and vanishing into the ocean. Then I saw that the snake's tail had emerged from his mouth, and the breath had left the wise man's body.

Seeing this, I marveled: Oh Ram, what mystery is this? With this worry I turned back, so I could say, Oh people of Dwarka! Here, you are fighting to the death; there, the snake has gone down into the ocean. But before I could get to the town, the ocean waves had already reached it. The town, which had been a light of peace in the ocean of existence, now looked like a bubble in the churning ocean waves.* Thus as he was dying in the midst of the field of Kurukshetra, Bhisham said to Yudhishtir, "Oh Yudhishtir, in the beginning there was water, for everything is made only of water. And now I've realized that in the end too there's only water. The source is water, the end is water. *Om, shanti, shanti, shanti*—"

. . . He shook himself, and looked at his sleeping companion—who seemed to have been sleeping through many births, oblivious to the world and everything in it, snoring long and loudly. He glanced out of the cave and at once pulled his head back in, for it was very dark outside and a hurricane had begun to blow. He muttered, There's still a lot of the night left. The nights of mischief are so long—he looked at his sleeping companion. How restfully he's sleeping, while outside a hurricane is raging. And how long he's slept, though he meant to sleep for only seven hundred years! But now his own eyelids too began to feel heavy. Yawning hugely, he muttered, Now it's time to go to sleep.

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ELEVEN

“SON, THAT bunch of keys is still lying around.”

He saw the bunch of keys lying on the table, and felt ashamed. Abba Jan had, in his last moments, confided them to him so carefully! “Ammi, today I’ll put them away for sure.”

“Yes, son, they’re a trust from your forefathers. You should keep them carefully.” As she spoke, Ammi Jan left the room. After all, she had other household tasks to attend to.

A trust from my forefathers, he murmured. “Son, these are the keys of a house to which you no longer have any right.” The keys of that house, and of that land. The keys of Rupnagar. The keys are here with me, and there a whole time is locked up, a time that has passed. But time doesn’t pass! It keeps passing, but it doesn’t pass. It keeps hovering around. And houses never stay empty. When those who lived in them go away, the time lives on in the houses. So many empty old houses in Rupnagar came and occupied his imagination. That house with the jujube-tree, the one in the lane near the mosque, the one that had a big lock on its main gate. There’s no telling who used to live in that house, and when they shut it up and went away. By then it had been locked up for ages, and the padlock had gotten rusty, and inside the ceilings of a number of rooms had fallen in, leaving only the walls still standing. And one afternoon, chasing a kite, he came to its threshhold and saw that inside it was like a forest. The grass was so tall, and a papaya had sprouted and grown until it looked like a small tree. How surely houses that lie empty turn into forest. And how surely time—time too—that lies locked up inside, turns into forest. My memory—my enemy, my friend—leads me into the forest and abandons me there.

The night is enjoyable, will you go or will you stay?

The bed is springy, lover, will you go or will you stay?

The rain kept on coming down. From somewhere, from some house or other, in that rain-filled night, the sound of a drum kept coming—

“Zakir, make me a grave too.”

“Why should I? Make it yourself.”

Sabirah scrapes the moist dirt together and piles it around her white foot, and when she pulls her foot out, the mound, with its hollow, stays in place.

“Zakir! My grave is better than yours.”

“Oh really?”

“Put your foot in and see.”

My foot—in the grave molded by Sabirah’s soft white foot. How soft, how cool—

•

“Zakir, son! Have you heard? The son of the woman who runs the bakery has been shot.”

“Shot—how?” Startled, he looked at Ammi, who had come, badly upset, into his room.

“Why, Doomsday has come to the neighborhood! The poor woman had only the one son.”

“Who shot him?”

“Who? As though it were some one person we could name! The neighbors say that on Mall Road there’s a hail of bullets. *Are*, people are crazy for blood—they’re going mad! Just tell me, what did the bakery-woman’s son ever do to them?”

A hail of bullets, he muttered. Outside there was a hail of bullets, and inside he was wandering in the forests. One forest, then another forest, and then another forest. He went on advancing, and the forests kept on getting denser. What forest is this that I’m in? How dense, how deep. And this town —

“Oh Zakir, have you heard, they’ve been setting fires!” Ammi said in a terrified voice, the moment she entered the room.

“Fires?” Coming back from the forests, he looked at her. “Where have they set fires?”

“You know the house with the horses, where those wretches have their office? What party is it? It’s been driven right out of my head. I can’t remember the names of those parties and such at all!”

“It’s all right. There’s no need at all to remember their names.”

“The neighborhood women have been driving me crazy. They say, Let’s go out and see what’s happening.”

“Ammi, nothing is happening outside, please just sit down and stay calm.”

“Son, that’s just what I’ve come to say to you. Let anything happen outside, what’s it to us? I won’t let you go out today,” Ammi said, and at once left the room.

That’s just fine, let anything happen outside, he muttered. Nothing is happening outside. Everything is happening inside me. Everything that has already happened.

•

What’s happening is that the lock on the Great Gate has opened. The Small Bazaar is silent and desolate. The sound of footsteps only comes when a funeral procession sets out from one of the houses. After that, more silence, which grows even deeper. Will Rupnagar become entirely devoid of people?

“Nasir Ali, my son! You sent back the bullock-cart that had come from Danpur, and you did well. But do you know how many houses have been emptied since this morning, and how many funeral processions have set out?”

And when the house with the tamarind tree burned down, and all the water-carriers of Rupnagar came with their leather water-skins. But the water acted like kerosene, for after the water streamed onto the fire, the leaping flames grew even fiercer.

Hakim Bande Ali looked angrily at the whisperers. “But I ask you, what reason would some outsider have to come and start the fire?”

“Then who started it?”

“People! Don’t force me to speak. Quarrels over property have shattered this family.”

“Zakir, I’m afraid, let’s get out of here.”

“Sabbo, don’t be a coward, we’ll go in a minute.”

“I’m afraid, let’s get out of here.”

An explosion! The roof-beams were burning the way a forest burns.

•

“The fire engine has come.”

“The fire engine?” he asked, somewhat startled, as he returned from the forests.

“Why, if it had come a little later, the flames would have spread to the neighboring houses as well. And our house isn’t exactly detached, either!” As she spoke, she turned on her heel and went back, as though she had only come to tell him this news. But then she thought of something and stopped. “Zakir, shall I make you some tea?”

“Tea!” He looked at her, startled. “No, Ammi.” And at the same time he stood up.

Ammi looked at him suspiciously. “*Ai hai*, the moment I come you get up!”

“I’m going now.”

“What did you say?” Ammi almost screamed. “You’ve lost your mind! Is today any day to go out?”

“Ammi! Khvajah Sahib insisted very strongly. Abba Jan’s grave has subsided. I’m going to the cemetery to see to it.”

Ammi, hearing this, wavered, but then she said, “Son, you could do it tomorrow instead.”

“Tomorrow! Ammi, you have a lot of faith in tomorrow.” He looked hard at his mother. “Tomorrow might be even worse than today.”

Ammi was completely crushed. She couldn’t even think of an answer. And he quickly put his shoes on, combed his hair, and went out.

At the door he encountered Khvajah Sahib. “I was just coming to see you. Where are you going?”

“I’m doing as you told me yesterday. I’m going to the cemetery.”

“But,” Khvajah Sahib said uncertainly, “How will you go? There’s a lot of disturbance over that way.”

“No, I’ll get there.”

Khvajah Sahib paused, then said, “If you’ll take my advice, don’t go today. Go tomorrow.”

“Very good! I thought Ammi was the only devout optimist. Khvajah Sahib, you too believe that tomorrow will be better!”

Khvajah Sahib was at a loss for words. Then, after a pause, he said apologetically, “Son, I don’t know how you feel about this. Since the Maulana Sahib’s death, I’ve perhaps begun to assume some rights over you.

Or perhaps now in Karamat's place I—" Khvajah Sahib's voice became a bit choked up. Before finishing his sentence, he fell silent.

He tried to reassure Khvajah Sahib. "You've never been one to lose hope! What kind of talk is this? Now that you've waited so long, you should wait a bit longer. Who knows when—and why not? People have been known to come back, even after years. I know one man myself who's knocked around here and there for years, and has just now come back."

"Son," Khvajah Sahib said hopelessly, "the time for coming home has passed. And now what's the point of anyone's coming here? Don't you see what's happening? Maulana Sahib was lucky to depart in peace." He paused, thought, then said, "Go, son, I won't stop you. Maulana Sahib was disturbed. But when you come back, tell me, so I can feel at ease."

Passing through that narrow street, he hesitated. Ammi was right. He had not imagined then that the fire could spread. And the area where it was burning was not too far from their house. So many houses in the neighborhood had come within the range of the flames and been blackened. The fire brigade had arrived and were standing by. Their long hose passed from the road into a burned-out house which had lost its roof and was filled with black, smoking ruins. Groups of people stood around, staring at the burned-out house and at the firemen with their brass helmets.

Passing by Nazira's shop, which was closed, he reached the road, which was empty for a long distance. Empty and silent. In the middle of the road a flock of birds had alighted; hearing the sound of footsteps, they were startled and looked at him with surprise, then flew away with a whir of wings. A little way ahead of him a kite, with its wings spread, was strolling down the road. At the tap of footsteps it hesitated, looked at him with round astonished eyes, seized a scrap of carrion in its beak and flew off. Then for a long way the road was absolutely empty. In the silence how loud the tap of his footsteps sounded, and what a burden it became to his ears. Ahead, in the closed bazaar, bricks lay scattered everywhere. Smashed car windows, a half-burned tire. His loud, sharp footsteps. He slowed to a pause. Some hesitation. Something had happened here, and while he was wondering what might have happened he suddenly felt that someone was watching him. He glanced to the right and the left. The shops were all closed. But near them policemen with truncheons were standing, rank upon rank,

absolutely silent. Only their eyes moved, following the passersby. But who was passing by? At that time he alone was walking.

Ahead, the road grew more and more frightening. Emerging from the zone of silence, he entered the zone of noise. Somewhere very near, slogans were being shouted and smoke was rising. Is something burning? No, I think somebody just set fire to a tire. But anyway, what do I care? I should think about something else. Now how far is the cemetery from here? Surendar's letter. I cruel? He's talking nonsense. But beyond this he couldn't think of anything more. From a cross-street a flood was pouring in. The next moment he found himself in the midst of the crowd. Tense faces, bloodshot eyes, necks with swollen veins, slogans and abuse on their lips. Who are these people? All the faces were strange to him. After a while, out of the flood of strange faces a familiar form appeared, saw him, and paused.

"Are you part of the procession too?"

"No."

"Then why are you going with them?"

"I'm not going with them. I'm going to the cemetery. To my father's grave."

"They're going toward the cemetery too."

"Toward the cemetery! —Why?"

"Near the cemetery, in that red building, there's a police post. They're going to raid it."

"That's a real problem, what should I do?"

"Do you have to go by this road? Go by some other road. If you turn here on the road to the church, from there you can go through the back lanes and get to the cemetery."

"Yes, that's what I can do."

But he couldn't do it. There was such a sea of people all around him that he was entirely trapped. He was moving the way a straw is borne along in a flood. He looked helplessly at the faces around him. They seemed to have been stretched out and elongated. Then they began to be flat. Stretched-out necks, flat faces, red mouths, and hairy bodies that seemed to bristle with excitement. He was frightened. What if their necks should stretch and stretch, and their faces flatten and flatten, until their shapes changed entirely,* or even lost all shape? Am I one of them? Will I be raised up along with them? —No! Then should I make an announcement—an announcement in this crowd? Who'll hear? You can't even hear if

somebody yells in your ear! At least, I mustn't go with them. Let them go to the cemetery by their road, and I by mine. I must get out of this crowd quickly, for fear that I too—that my neck too might stretch, and my face flatten, and the veins in my neck swell, and my face— Suddenly there was a commotion. Firing had begun: panic, slogans, abuse, a rain of bricks, a hail of bullets. A truck passed swiftly by him, on which stood long-necked flat-faced troops with pistols in their hands, moving toward the red building visible ahead. It seemed strange to him that the troops who stood on the high roof of the building and peered out the windows of the lower stories suddenly also had stretched-out necks and faces growing more and more flattened. They too were armed with pistols. A hail of bullets began. Panic, shrieks and cries, a storm of non-human yells. He, a straw floating in the storm waves.

He didn't know how much later it was, and how it came about, but when his mind began to clear somewhat he found himself lying by the cemetery gate. I should go inside, so I can hide among the graves and escape this Doomsday-chaos. Staggering and stumbling, he went inside and wandered among the graves. He paused: This is Abba Jan's grave. He sat down beside the grave, thinking that when he came to himself he would say the Fatihah. He was still unable to catch his breath, and his body was trembling. The sound of firing could be heard. The sound of slogans too, but they were hardly slogans any more. Now they were a torrent of ferocious, inhuman yelling. And why was there this smoke? Startled, he raised his eyes above the buildings before him, where black and brown clouds of smoke were welling up, then coming together in a thick black column and rising into the heights. "Fire," he muttered, in a shaky, frightened voice. Now the smoke was coming toward the cemetery, and then it seemed that the whole cemetery was full of smoke. Sitting among the graves, he was amidst clouds of smoke. Even more than his breath, his senses were gripped by the smoke. In his imagination the whole city was burning. Their tails were like torches, and swept through the city like a broom, the crackling, blazing city. So much had already burned, so much was burning. So many buildings had already been destroyed, so many were about to collapse. He crawled and crawled, trying to come out from under the rubble. He felt that he was not all in one piece. Am I myself, or the rubble of myself? "What a building sorrow has destroyed!"* Am I in pieces? Everything around me is in pieces.

Time too. In the womb of that one time there were so many times. I'm wandering, broken up—through what times?

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. . . "The city has already burned, but our tails are still burning. Where shall we put our burning tails?"* "Son, put them in your mouths." We did. "Our tails have been cooled off under our teeth, between tongue and palate, but why have our faces turned black?" "The end of every fire is soot."

. . . Then I asked that black-faced wretch, "*Ai* black-faced, black-fortuned one! May your mother sit in mourning for you! Were you one of the letter-writers?"* Bowing his head, he replied, "It was I myself who wrote the first letter: 'The harvest is ready. Flowers are blooming in the gardens, the grapevines are heavy with bunches of grapes.' Then I was the first of them all to swear allegiance to his envoy." "Then after that, what happened to you?" "Not to me, to the city," and he whispered, "*Ai* brother, speak softly, or rather, don't speak at all, for the harvest of heads is ripe, and there's a curfew in Kufa." A curfew in Kufa! I was astonished, and wandered from lane to lane. The lanes were deserted, the streets empty, the windows closed, the doors locked, the mosque echoing with silence. When he stood to lead the prayer, those praying with him formed in rows that filled the courtyard of the mosque all the way to the back. When at the end of the prayers he turned to look, the rows of men had vanished, the mosque was empty. When he entered the mosque he was surrounded by men going to say their prayers, and when he left the mosque he was alone.* He wandered through empty streets and deserted lanes. Flowers were blooming in the gardens, the grapevines were heavy with bunches of grapes, and the harvest of heads was ripe. Don't speak, for fear you might be recognized—

. . . Then the Buddha opened his lips: "In a dense forest lived a tiger. Springtime, the night of the full moon. The tiger and his cub were enjoying themselves in the forest. One time he roared so loudly that the whole forest echoed. Hearing his roar, the jackals too shook themselves. They began howling and wailing at the top of their voices. For a long time they kept howling and wailing. They aroused the whole forest, but the tiger remained silent. His cub said, 'Oh my father! You, so brave, the king of the forest—

it’s surprising that the jackals are making so much noise, and you are silent.’ The tiger replied, ‘Oh my son! Keep one word of your father’s close to your heart: when jackals speak, then tigers fall silent.’”

Hearing this parable, one monk said, “Oh Lord Buddha, when did this take place?” He smiled and said, “In the time when I had taken birth as a tiger and was living far from Banaras in the foothills of the Himalayas. Rahul was with me.”

. . . After these words, the Buddha fell silent. When he had remained silent for a long time, the monks fell into perplexity: had the time to keep silent come once again? When the wise will fall silent, and shoelaces will speak. This is the time when shoelaces speak. So don’t speak, for fear you might be recognized. They spoke, and were recognized, and the harvest of heads began to be cut down. When I reached the edge of the water-channel, the branches of the leafy tree were loaded with heads.* The cut-off heads, seeing me, burst out laughing, and began to fall into the water-channel with a plop! plop! like ripe fruits. I was afraid my head might have ripened too. Before the fruit could fall from the branch, I leaped into the water-channel. Struggling to stay afloat, I somehow reached the far bank. I came out of the water-channel and decided to head for the city. But there were no vehicles at all. The bus stand was deserted. Not a scooter-cab, not a taxi. Not even a private car to be seen. I asked a passerby, “What’s this? There’s not a vehicle to be seen.” He replied, “There’s a strike in the city today. All the vehicles are off the road and all the bazaars are closed.” I set out on foot. I had gone only a little way, when a procession overtook me. It was a very big procession. A countless multitude. A turbulent ocean of heads. But where are the heads? I looked closely—no one had a head. Where had their heads gone? And was my head still there? Since coming out of the water-channel it hadn’t occurred to me to see whether I had brought my head out intact, or lost it. I touched my head with both hands, and found it safe on my neck. I offered thanks to the Lord. It was as hot as Doomsday. “Oh Lord, save us from the fire of Hell.”* The sun had come down to only one and a quarter spears’ length from the earth,* and skulls were bubbling like cooking-pots. Today heads are burdens on the shoulders. Those who have been released from this burden are fortunate. If I’d left my head back there, I would have been safe. Those who have heads, and have brains in their heads, are in trouble today. Those who have brains in their heads, and

tongues in their mouths. “I swear by Time, man is surely in loss.”* “It’s evening. The river has stopped flowing,”* the tents have already burned. “Burnt-out fires here, broken tent-ropes there.”* A few tent-walls are still burning. In their light I saw that the corpses had no heads. Where are their heads? Oh brother, they have been lifted on the points of spears.* Now you’ll see them at the court of Damascus. Shoelaces are speaking. The speaker’s head is on a platter. “*Ai* my dear friend! Now what news of the city?” “Oh brother, now the heads of the head-cutters have been cut off and brought into the court.” And a centipede crawled in through the nose and out through the mouth and in through the nose again. The head on the platter is that of the wretch who cut off the blessed head and lifted it on the point of a spear and put it on a platter and presented it at the court. At that court how many heads were presented on platters! And how many more will be presented. Then the son of David said to his son, “My son, that which is crooked cannot be made straight. Those who have died are fortunate, those who are alive are unfortunate.* Least fortunate of all are those who are yet to be born.” “*Ai*, traveler, if you’ve passed through the blessed city, tell us the news.” The camel-rider wept. “*Ai* brother, don’t ask how things are there.” The corpse of that valiant man hung for three days on a gallows in the center of the blessed city. Then his mother emerged from her house. She came to that spot, looked at her son’s hanging body, and said, “My chevalier, your time for dismounting has not yet come.”* There is peace in the city. The wise men are silent. The harvests have been reaped. The harvest of heads, the harvest of virgins. How many children died, writhing with hunger and wailing with thirst. How many laps were emptied. How many women, the women of the blessed city—the wells of Jahanabad are choked with the corpses of women. Those whom even the sun never saw unveiled, are exposed to public view. *Ai* city, how did you become sacred, how did you become dishonored? Alas for your ruined lanes—and for those who have ruined you, despite your benefits to them! How do cities become sacred, how do they become dishonored at the hands of those who benefit from them and know them as sacred! Then where did the sacredness of that sacred city go? Its protector, breaking his flute, smashing his pitcher, went off—into what forests? And a white snake emerged from that wise man’s mouth and slithered off into the waves of the ocean. Water at first, water at the last. *Om*, *shanti*, *shanti*, *shanti*—“I swear by Time, man is surely in loss.” Those people are like spiders, they have built their houses;

and of all frail houses, the spider's house is frailest. So alas for those towns that were overpowered by a cry, or swept away by a torrent of water, or wind, or fire. How many mansions lie with their roofs fallen in. How many wells of cold sweet water have been filled with dust; how many have been choked with the corpses of virtuous women. "From the Jama Masjid to the Rajghat Gate is a desolate wasteland."* Special Bazaar, Urdu Bazaar, Khanam's Bazaar, where have all the bazaars gone? No water-carriers, no clinking of water vessels. Lanes that were like leaves from a painter's album have been laid waste. "Now Jahanabad lies in ruins—"*

. . . After a long silence, the Buddha opened his lips: "Monks, just imagine a house which is burning on all four sides. Inside it some children are stumbling around, trembling with fear. Oh monks, men and women are children, stumbling around in a fiercely blazing house." "I swear by Time, man is surely in loss."

. . . "*Ai* my son! How did you find the towns?"

"My father, I found the towns uneasy. East, west, north, south, I went in all directions searching for joy and peace. In every direction I found the children of Adam unhappy and troubled."

"My son, you were searching for something not to be found under the blue sky."

"Then, *ai* my father, what do you say to me?"

"I will say to you what the son of David said to his son: my son, scattered clouds never come together again. Clouds that have rained themselves out never rain again. So before the birds fall silent and the sound of the grindstone ceases, and before those who gaze out of the windows are darkened and the gates of the street are shut, and before the silver cord is loosed and the golden bowl is broken and the pitcher is smashed at the well and—"*

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"Fellow, what are you doing here?"

He looked up with a start at Afzal, who was somehow there, standing by his head.

“Yar, I came to my father’s grave. Then I was trapped here. Today the whole mess took place right around the cemetery. But how do you happen to be here?”

“I have the same matter of graves to deal with that you do. My grandmother is buried here too.” Gesturing: “That one over there, that’s her grave.” He paused; then, brokenly—“Zakir, my grandmother’s death has taken away my strength.” He fell silent. For a long time he sat in silence, lost in his thoughts. Then he said slowly, “Zakir, doesn’t it seem strange to you?”

“What?”

“That we’ve met, in the turmoil of the day, among graves.”

He’d forgotten about that. He sat up with a start, and looked around him. Graves and more graves. And now evening was falling. “Yar, evening is coming, let’s go.”

“Where shall we go from here?” Afzal asked innocently.

“Anywhere. Let’s leave.” He got to his feet.

The road was empty for a long distance, and also full. From one side to the other, how many bricks lay scattered. Broken bricks, shattered bits of car windows, half-burned tires. How many traffic signals stood blindly, deprived of their lights, and how many had been bent out of shape. The silence betrayed the earlier tumult. It’s strange that in such cases the deep silence that falls afterwards is in exact proportion to the tumult that raged before. It was becoming hard to walk. So many scattered bricks and fragments of car windows and rubble from ruined mansions.

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. . . Saadat Khan’s estate, the General’s wife’s mansion, Sahib Ram’s garden and mansion, all destroyed, filled with dust. From the Jama Masjid to Rajghat is a wilderness. If the heaps of bricks lying around could be removed, there would be total emptiness. At Hare-bhare Shah’s tomb, the same mad faqir was sitting there again. I was frightened, I was afraid he might roar at me again. But today there was no roar. Then I myself approached him. I asked respectfully, “Shah Sahib, what do you foresee?”

“What has already happened will happen again.”

“That is already occurring.”

He looked at me with furious eyes. He roared, “Go away! I have no orders to reveal anything further.”

I came away.

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“Zakir, my friend!” Afzal paused, then said, “It seems there’s been a lot of tumult.” In fact he had seen spots of blood on the road, and was frightened.

“Yes, it does seem so.”

“People have grown cruel,” Afzal muttered.

Cruel—hearing that word on Afzal’s lips he was somewhat startled, but remained silent.

They had both fallen silent. They were only walking, together but not connected to each other.

“The Shiraz too!” they both exclaimed at the same time. They had unconsciously headed in that direction, and when they arrived they were taken aback.

The Shiraz was closed, but not merely in the ordinary way: all the glass panes in its doors had been smashed. Its door and walls were covered with soot. The signboard that had hung in front of it had been burned, and lay on the ground right before the door. There were so many bricks scattered around that they could be seen inside as well as outside. So here too there had been a furious attack, and here too a fire had been set. They both stared fixedly at the Shiraz. Then, avoiding the scattered bricks and broken glass, they sat down right there on the sidewalk.

They sat in silence, and the shadows of evening spread. The road before them lay in deep silence. No sound of feet, no noise of vehicles. Then in the dusk a shadow appeared, coming toward them. They looked closely to see who it was. “Irfan,” he said to himself, and in his mind’s eye he saw the Imperial’s tawny cat—the way he had seen her as he passed, during that silent evening when he had wandered in the debris of the Imperial.

Irfan, without surprise, saw him and Afzal sitting there. Then, without saying a word, he sat down beside them. All three sat like statues. In the deepening dusk of the evening, three motionless shadows.

Suddenly Afzal stood up, as though he was sick of sitting silent and motionless. He stood before them both, hands submissively folded. “Yar, you two are good men. Forgive me. I wasn’t able to protect the city.”

They both looked at him, went on looking at him, in silence. Today this manner of Afzal's didn't cause Irfan any irritation.

Afzal stood for a while. Then he sat down, then he said slowly, "Yar, we weren't virtuous either." He fell silent, and looked at them both. "We're cruel. We too."

Zakir looked quietly at Afzal. "I'm cruel?" He wanted to correct Afzal's words, or perhaps he was only murmuring to himself.

Afzal pulled a notebook out of his pocket, glanced over the list of names, inked all the names out with a pen. "There are no virtuous men."

Neither he nor Irfan showed any reaction. For a long time the three sat silently. Then he grew somewhat restless.

"Yar," he said to Irfan, "I want to write her a letter."

"Now?" Irfan stared into his face.

"Yes, now."

"Now when—" There was no telling what Irfan had wanted to say; in the midst of his sentence he fell silent.

"Yes, now when—" He paused in the midst of his sentence, then took a different tack. "Before—" Confused, he fell silent.

Before—he tried to get it clear in his mind—before—before the parting of her hair fills with silver, and the birds fall silent, and before the keys rust, and the doors of the streets are shut—and before the silver cord is loosed, and the golden bowl is shattered, and the pitcher is broken at the well, and the sandalwood tree, and the snake in the ocean, and—

"Why are you silent?" Irfan was gazing steadily at him.

"Silence." Afzal, placing a finger on his lips, signaled Irfan to be silent. "I think we will see a sign."

"A sign? What sign can there be now?" Irfan said with bitterness and despair.

"Fellow, signs always come at just these times, when all around—" he paused in the middle of his speech. Then he said in a whisper, "This is the time for a sign—"

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

INTIZAR Husain chose to call his now-famous novel *Basti*, a word that can refer to any place where groups of people live, from a neighborhood to a city. The novel itself is full of towns, including not only present ones in Pakistan and India, but also at least one from the past (the Delhi of 1857), some mythic ones from Muslim and Hindu story tradition, and two invented ones, Rupnagar and Vyaspur. Although all the outward events clearly take place during Zakir's adult life in Lahore, Lahore is never identified by name —it remains "this city" from first to last. And the inward events take place in Zakir's memory and imagination alone, as he moves among the times and places of his personal and cultural history. The author has in some cases blurred the transitions. I've tried to clarify them a bit by using breaks in the text to show movements in time and place, and using ". . ." where fantasy passages begin. Parts of chapters seven, eight, ten, and eleven include fantasy and tangled thoughts. While I've provided footnotes identifying quotations and references, the tangle itself is part of the writer's artistry.

I have tried to make the translation convenient both to readers who know a great deal about South Asia, and to those who know less. Thus wherever possible I've preferred glossary entries to footnotes, since they are less obtrusive to the reader who does not need them. To avoid visual distraction, glossary entries are not identified in the text itself, but all the important names and terms, and most secondary ones, can readily be found. Since the cultural material presupposed by the novel is such a rich mixture of traditional and modern Muslim and Hindu (and Buddhist) material, the glossary is extensive; but it is focused narrowly on the use of each name and term in the novel itself, and seeks to convey only the minimum background information that the author clearly expects the reader to have.

In places, the novel presents the translator with intractable problems— passages in which the language shifts radically from one register to another, in ways that are immensely evocative in Urdu but virtually impossible to capture in English. The use of traditional Muslim religious vocabulary (e.g., in the story of Cain and Abel in Chapter One) can be only feebly suggested by language reminiscent of the King James Version. Rhyming prose and other characteristic flourishes from the Perso-Arabic story-telling tradition

(e.g., in the description of the flourishing city in Chapter Seven) lose much of their elegance in English. The changes in register used for the speech of servants (e.g., the energetic speech of the Hindu servant girl Phullo in Chapter One) cannot be sufficiently differentiated in standard English; nor can the effect of the Sanskritized style of some of the stories from the Hindu tradition (e.g., the questions asked by the raja of the sage in Chapter Seven). These losses are simply part of the price both translator and reader must pay.

There are certain kinds of characteristic speech-markers, however, that I could and did retain. Traditional Urdu is notable for its love of direct address and direct discourse. Speeches often begin with a form of address—sometimes a name or kinship term, or very commonly a vocative particle of some sort; while omitting or translating most, I have retained a few of the more vivid, including the rueful *ai* and the ubiquitous, indispensable, untranslatable *yar*. In general, each sentence of mine translates one of the novel's sentences, with a minimum of alteration. I have not "transcreated" the text or smoothed out its stylistic idiosyncrasies.

My goal has not been to make the characters sound like Americans. I want a careful balance: sentences that are within the range of standard English, but a rhythm that retains the flow of Urdu. I want the reader to have an agreeable double experience: to realize through the semitransparent medium of English that people from a different culture are living their own lives, not ours. While the sentences swim in Urdu like fish in a sea, in English I want them at least to swim like fish in a well-designed aquarium. Urdu is an Indo-European language with a grammar not radically different from that of English, and modern Urdu prose does manage, for the most part, to come across into English without unacceptable losses. (This is unfortunately far from being the case with much of the older prose and poetry.)

Some Pakistanis have criticized my choice of this novel, on the grounds that it offers a "negative impression" of their culture, a mood of "nostalgia." Certainly *Basti* has been controversial; and certainly it is nothing like a definitive, complete picture of modern Pakistan. But surely no intelligent reader will expect it to be. Self-critical literature is one mark of an open and confident society; sophisticated literature is one mark of a rich and healthy language. *Basti* is not a perfect novel, but it is a fine one, and thought provoking, and unforgettably evocative at its best. I hope it will become

part of a growing repertoire of good Urdu novels translated into English; there are a number of promising modern works that would well repay the translator's efforts.

I am grateful to Professor M.U. Memon, of the University of Wisconsin, who proposed this project. For insight into the Urdu text I thank Professor Razi Wasti, former Qaid-e Azam Visiting Professor at Columbia University, who answered many questions; Janab Qamar Jalil of the Berkeley Urdu Language Program in Pakistan, who had previously compiled a useful serial glossary; and my students at Columbia, who read parts of the novel with me and shared their thoughts and feelings about it. My special thanks go to the author, Intizar Husain, for his kindness and patience with my many questions during my visit to Lahore in 1988. For valuable comments on the translation as a work of English prose, I am indebted to my teacher and friend C.M. Naim of the University of Chicago, to my friends David Rubin and Jennifer Crewe, and especially to my mother, a superb grammarian and detector of small errors. The chapter-divider designs were generously provided by my friend Adil Mansuri. Chapter One of the novel appeared first in *Edebiyat*, and is reprinted (with minor changes) by the editors' kind consent.

Above all, I am deeply grateful for the help of my best friend and collaborator, the distinguished critic and writer Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, who listened to me read my whole draft aloud while he compared it with the original, and whose comments not only saved me from numerous mistakes, but immeasurably increased the subtlety and depth of the translation. I have had the best possible help in this task, and any errors that remain are mine alone.

—Frances W. Pritchett

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NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

* *Ammi . . . overturned the pan and stood up:* By custom, food is not cooked in a newly bereaved household.

* *istikharah:* A way of ascertaining the prospects for the future by counting prayer-beads and reciting prayers according to a formula.

* *rubbed with a mango-stone:* For its cooling and astringent effect on the shaved skin.

CHAPTER TWO

* *taking his misfortunes onto herself:* A traditional symbolic gesture that usually involves running the palms of the hands down the beloved person's cheeks, then bringing the hands to one's own cheeks, making fists, and cracking the knuckles.

* "*Open this heavy door . . .":* A line from a famous poem, "Voice in the Wilderness," by MUNIR NIYAZI.

CHAPTER THREE

* "*The Mulla goes only . . .":* A well-known proverb, applied to someone who is a creature of habit and has a limited, predictable range of activity. It also suggests a measure of helplessness.

CHAPTER FOUR

* "*the sleeper's female calf turns male":* A proverbial warning against inattention: the heedless cow-owner finds that his newborn female calf has been stealthily replaced by a (much less valuable) male calf.

* "*the bald man has gotten fingernails":* This common proverb suggests that someone has obtained what is not suited to him.

* “*Where is my friend’s voice . . .”:* A line of Persian verse from the Masnavi of Rumi (1207–1273).

CHAPTER FIVE

* “*Shah Dulah’s mice”:* These were retarded children born with heads too small for their bodies, who were often dedicated to the popular saint Shah Dulah to protect them from an early death.

* “*Houses and inns and places . . .”:* Part of a line from a poem by Munir Niyazi.

CHAPTER SIX

* “*First the sword and spear . . .”:* An echo from a poem by IQBAL.

* *filbert branches:* Water to wash a dead body is customarily heated with filbert leaves in it.

* *war has broken out:* On December 3, 1971, war broke out with India; India had been vigorously supporting the disaffected party in East Pakistan.

CHAPTER SEVEN

* “*London is victorious . . .”:* A line from a cynical World War II poem by Zafar Ali Khan (1873–1956).

* *pseudo-Taj Mahal*: The reference is to WAPDA House, headquarters of the Water and Power Development Authority, a prominent Lahore landmark.

* “*What was I good for . . .”:* A line from a ghazal by Firaq Gorakhpuri (1896–1982).

* “*Guess from my garden . . .”:* A famous line of Persian verse, used like a proverb.

* *Every day . . . Glorious King's serpents:* An echo of the story of Zahhak from the *SHAH NAMAH*.

* "*a new flower blooming":* This Persian proverb implies skepticism or contempt.

* "*The cannons cannot . . . India is done for!":* It is also said that this sarcastic verse was composed by someone else, and that when BAHADUR SHAH "ZAFAR" heard it he replied with another verse expressing undaunted fighting spirit.

* *DECEMBER 16:* December 16, 1971, was the day the Indian Army entered Dhaka, and the birth of an independent Bangladesh was assured.

* *Today is September 14 . . . :* September 14, 1857, was the day the British succeeded in retaking Delhi from the rebels.

CHAPTER EIGHT

* "*these fighters for the faith . . .":* The first line of a famous poem by Iqbal, "Tariq's Prayer."

* "*Surely God is with the patient":* Quran 2:153.

* "*Then where does this smoke . . .":* A line from a ghazal by MIR.

* "*It's as if my heart . . .":* Based on a line from a ghazal by Mir. The line establishes a punning relationship between "heart" (*dil*) and "Delhi" (*dilli*).

* "*And when we had obtained . . . from the land":* Quran 2:84–85

* "*You murdered . . .":* Based on a passage from the *Nahj ul-balaghah*, attributed to Hhazrat Ali.

* "*The remnant who survived . . . destroyed by fire.":* Based on Nehemiah 1:1–3.

* *A river of blood is flowing . . .”:* A passage from one of GHALIB’s letters, describing the disasters he lived through in 1857. The passage ends with the first line of a verse from one of his ghazals. The second line, which completes the thought, is: “Just wait and see what happens to me next.”

* “*Lanes that were like leaves . . .”:* Based on a line from a ghazal by Mir.

CHAPTER NINE

* *read the omens:* One common method is to open the works of the great Persian poet Hafiz (1320–1390), read a line at random, and draw conclusions from it.

CHAPTER TEN

* “*Suddenly I was afraid . . .”:* In Quran 46:24–25, a hurricane sent by God sweeps down and devastates the sinful tribe of Ad. In Quran 79:13–14, a single loud cry announces the onset of Judgment Day.

* “*The way they’d flee . . . during an earthquake.”:* A line from an elegy on KARBALA by Mir Anis (1802–1874).

* *The town . . . now looked like a bubble in the churning ocean waves*: Based on a folk account of the death of KRISHAN, who spent much of his adult life in Dwarka, a town on the west coast of Gujarat.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

* *until their shapes changed entirely:* In South Asian Muslim folk tradition, the faces of sinners grow deformed, and they are raised from the dead in animal shapes.

* “*What a building sorrow . . .*”:A line from a ghazal by Mir.

* “*The city has already burned . . .*”: Based on a folk version of an episode from the *Ramayan*, in which the mighty monkey Hanuman and his companions spread flames through Lanka with their burning tails. When

they reach Sita, RAMCHANDAR-JI's captive wife, she counsels them on how to quench the fire.

* *letter-writers:* Some residents of the city of Kufa, in Iraq, wrote letters inviting HUSAIN to come to Kufa and assume power; this led to his betrayal and death. Husain first sent his cousin Muslim bin Aqil to Kufa as an envoy.

* *he was alone:* It had been decreed that whoever prayed behind Husain's envoy Muslim, and thus showed respect for him, would die.

* *the leafy tree:* In Persian and Urdu story tradition, the hero Hatim Tai encounters a similar tree.

* *"Oh Lord, save us from the fire of Hell"* Quran 2:201; 3:191.

* *The sun had come down:* A Muslim folk tradition about the torments of Doomsday.

* *"I swear by Time, man is surely in loss":* Quran 103:1–2.

* *"It's evening . . ."*: A line from a ghazal by the minor poet Agha Hajju Sharaf (fl. 1850s).

* *Burnt-out fires here . . .* : A line from a poem by Iqbal.

* *lifted on the points of spears:* The heads of Husain and his companions met this fate.

* *"who are alive are unfortunate":* Based on Ecclesiastes 1:1, 1:15, 4:2.

* *"your time for dismounting has not yet come":* A story traditionally told about one of Husain's cousin Muslim's prominent supporters in Kufa.

* *"a desolate wasteland":* From one of Ghalib's letters describing the disasters of 1857.

* *"Now Jahanabad lies in ruins—":* A line from a ghazal by Mir. The second line, which completes the thought, is "Otherwise, at every step a

house was here.”

* *the pitcher is smashed at the well* . . . : Based on Ecclesiastes 12:1-8.

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GLOSSARY

NOTE: All names and terms are described *only* as they are used in the novel itself. They are generally spelled the way the novel spells them, based on Urdu script.

Abba Jan: Zakir's name for his father. "Abba" is something like "Dad." "Jan" is a title appended to kinship terms to show intimacy and affection.

Abul Hasan: A rich merchant's son who was betrayed by his friends, and who therefore vowed to seek out and entertain only strangers.

ai: An emphatic exclamation, used vocatively to command attention or express surprise or consternation.

ai hai: An exclamation of rueful regret, characteristically used by older women.

Ali: The Prophet's son-in-law, husband of Fatimah, father of Hasan and Husain. He is deeply venerated, and is often referred to by epithets like "the Chosen One" and "the Lion of God."

Aligarh: A small city southeast of Delhi, site of the famous Aligarh Muslim University.

Ambala: A city north of Delhi, in modern Haryana, close to the Punjab border.

Ammi: Zakir's name for his mother. "Ammi" is something like "Mom."

Amritsar: The Indian city located right across the border from Lahore, home to jallianwala bagh.

Anarkali: Lahore's most famous old market, filled with a maze of tiny lanes where almost anything can be bought.

Appearance: The emergence of the Hidden Imam from concealment, an apocalyptic event awaited by many Shiites.

are: An exclamation of surprise.

Ayub dictatorship: The military government headed by General Ayub Khan, which seized power from the civilian government in 1958 and ruled until Ayub was deposed by General Yahya Khan in 1969.

Baba Farid: An affectionate way of referring to Shaikh Farid ud-Din Ganj-e Shakar, the great twelfth-century saint and mystic of North India.

Baghbanpura: A neighborhood in the northeast part of Lahore.

Bahadur Shah: The last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah (1775–1862) used the pen-name "Zafar" in his poetry, and was forced to live as a British pensioner. During the rebellion of 1857 he was made titular head of the rebels; court politics then led to the replacement of Bakht Khan, the most effective general, by Mirza Mughal and Mirza Ghaus, two of the emperor's useless sons.

Bakht Khan: See Bahadur Shah.

Basic Democracy: A multi-layered system instituted by the Ayub regime in 1959, in which only the bottom layer, consisting of thousands of representatives called Basic Democrats, was directly elected; the system was presented as a nonpolitical one for achieving rural education and uplift.

Batul: KHALAH JAN's real name.

Bhisham: See *Mahabharat*.

Bi Amma: Zakir's name for his paternal grandmother. "Bi" is a short form of "Bibi." "Amma" means "mother."

Bibi: A polite form of address for a woman.

binot: An indigenous Indic form of martial art, which relies on dexterity and swift movement rather than on elaborate weapons.

birbani: In Indic folk tradition, a woman who has been killed by witchcraft, and whose spirit is used by the witch for magical purposes.

Brahma-ji: In Hindu mythology, the World-creator.

Brindaban: See KRISHAN.

Bulandshahr: A city east of Delhi, on the road to Aligarh.

Chacha Jan: Zakir's uncle, his father's younger brother.

Danpur: A town in Bulandshahr district, in Uttar Pradesh; the home of Zakir's great-uncle.

Data Ganj Bakhsh: A famous eleventh-century saint and mystic, buried in Lahore and considered to be a patron of the city.

Dulhan Bi: Sharifan's name for Ammi Jan, referring to her as the "bride" she was when she came to the house long ago.

dupattah: A very long, wide, lightweight scarf worn by women. It was draped over the shoulders and bosom, and sometimes over the head as well, with the two ends often hanging down in back.

Emigration: The 1947 Partition of British-controlled India into two states, India and Pakistan, caused many Muslim families like Zakir's to leave their old homes on the Indian side of the line and cross the border into the new Muslim nation of Pakistan. For this experience they use the religiously meaningful word "hijrat," which evokes memories of the Prophet's journey from Mecca to Medina.

faqir: A Muslim ascetic, usually a solitary wanderer living on the voluntary gifts of the pious.

Fatihah: The opening chapter of the Quran; it is traditionally recited over the graves of the dead.

Fatimah: The Prophet’s daughter, wife of Ali and mother of Hasan and Husain.

’57: 1857, the year of the famous, desperate rebellion in North India against British power.

Frontier Mail: A famous train that runs between Bombay and Amritsar.

Gamal Abdel Nasser: The Egyptian President who took responsibility for his country’s 1967 defeat by Israel, and resigned from the Presidency.

Ghalib: Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869) was one of the two greatest classical Urdu poets; he lived through the siege of Delhi in 1857 and saw its terrible aftermath.

Gwalior: A city south of Agra, in northern Madhya Pradesh.

hai hai: An exclamation of sorrow and mourning, frequently used by women when a death occurs.

Hakim: A respectful title for a practitioner of traditional Islamic (i.e., Greek) medicine.

Hakim Nabina: A famous early-twentieth-century HAKIM of Delhi. He was blind; “nabina” means blind.

Hare-bhare Shah: A popular saint whose tomb is in Delhi near the Jama Masjid.

Hasan: The older brother of HUSAIN; he had already died before the battle of Karbala took place.

Hazrat: A title expressing veneration, generally used for religious personages.

Hazrat Sajjad: A respectful title for Zain ul-Abidin, a son (or nephew, according to other accounts) of HUSAIN.

Howrah Express: A famous train that crosses North India from Calcutta to Delhi.

Humayun's Tomb: An elaborate monument in Delhi where the second Mughal emperor, Humayun (d.1556), is buried.

huqqah: A form of pipe with a large stationary bowl in which tobacco is burned, a curved tube to pass the smoke through water to cool it, and a mouthpiece on a long flexible hose that can be passed easily from hand to hand.

Hur: A general sent out against HUSAIN by his Umayyid enemies; but he fought on Husain's side instead, and was one of the first to be martyred at Karbala.

Husain: The son of Fatimah and Ali, thus the Prophet's grandson. He was martyred on the field of KARBALA by political opponents who refused to recognize his right to succeed to the Caliphate.

Id: The greatest Muslim religious festival; following a month of dawn-to-dusk fasting, on this feast day families visit with their neighbors. "Id" is pronounced to rhyme with "heed."

Imam: A reverent title given to HUSAIN, and to certain of his successors venerated by Shiites. The title is also used for certain prominent religious personalities, and for someone who leads the prayer in a mosque.

Imambarah: A religious building used as the destination of processions during MUHARRAM, and as the site of MAJLIS gatherings.

Imperial: A large Western-style hotel in Lahore, well-known during the colonial era but no longer in existence.

"innovation": A theological term for an illegitimate change made in the SHARIAT.

Iqbal: Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the greatest Urdu and Indo-Persian poet of the twentieth century, was also a philosopher and

statesman. He began as a secular nationalist, but later called for the formation of Pakistan.

Iqlima: This daughter of Adam and Eve is not mentioned in the Quran, and occurs only in certain Muslim folk traditions.

Jabir bin Abdullah Ansari: One of the Prophet's companions during his stay in Medina.

Jahanabad: A name for that part of the old city of Delhi which was built by Shah Jahan (r. 1627–1658).

jalebi: A kind of curly sweet shaped like a pretzel; made of batter, it is first deep-fried, then soaked in sugar water.

Jallianwala Bagh: A park in Amrisar, site of an episode in 1919 in which a crowd of nonviolent nationalist demonstrators trapped in a walled garden were repeatedly fired upon by soldiers under a British general, leaving hundreds dead.

Jama Masjid: The magnificent Delhi mosque, also occasionally used for important public assemblies; it was built by Shah Jahan (r. 1627–1658).

Janamashtami: A popular Hindu festival that celebrates the eighth day after KRISHAN's birth.

Jhansi: A city in Uttar Pradesh, north of Gwalior. It was annexed by the British in 1853, when its king died childless. His widow, the famous Rani of Jhansi, armed herself as a warrior during the rebellion of 1857 and died heroically, fighting the British.

ji: A respectful and affectionate suffix sometimes added to proper names.

Kabuli Gate: A gate in the northwest part of the wall around the old city of Delhi, facing toward Kabul.

kalimah: The Muslim profession of faith, "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God." It is recited on many occasions, some associated with death.

Kanan Bala: A film star of the 1940s, famous for her songs.

Karbala: The battlefield in Iraq on which HUSAIN and his small band of followers were killed in 680 by the forces of their political rivals, the Umayyids. It is a site of the greatest religious importance to Muslims, especially Shiites. Fields used for Shiite religious purposes, like the one near Rupnagar (which seems to be enclosed by a wall), are sometimes piously given this name.

Karnal: A small city north of Delhi, in modern Haryana.

Khakis: Soldiers of the British-controlled Indian army of colonial times, so called from their khaki-colored uniforms.

Khalah Jan: Zakir's maternal aunt, Tahirah and Sabirah's mother.

Khan Bahadur Uncle: Zakir's late uncle, his father's older brother. "Khan Bahadur" is an honorific title awarded to him by the British.

Khilafat Movement: See MAULANA MUHAMMAD ALI.

Khvajah of Kalyar: The title of a thirteenth-century saint buried in the town of Kalyar, in Uttar Pradesh.

Krishan: The Hindu child-god, dark blue in color, who was raised among villagers in Brindaban, near Mathura. He was an adorable baby and child. As he grew older, he played his flute and danced seductively in the forest with the village girls, especially during the rainy season, which is always a romantic time in South Asia. Soon afterwards, he left Brindaban forever; he is thus an archetypal elusive lover.

Laila: The most famous beloved of Perso-Arabic story tradition. Although her family forced her to marry another man, she never became his wife in any real sense; she kept faith all her life with her true lover, MAJNUN.

Liaqat Ali Khan: The first Prime Minister of Pakistan, holding power from 1947 until his assassination in 1951.

Lorraine: A restaurant in Lahore, no longer in existence.

Lyallpur: A town in Pakistan, west of Lahore; it is now called Faisalabad.

Medina: The city in Saudi Arabia, north of Mecca, to which the Prophet made his EMIGRATION, and which he used as a base of operations during the latter part of his life. It is also the site of his tomb. To Muslims it is almost as sacred as Mecca itself.

Mahabharat: A great Sanskrit epic poem, one of the sources of Hindu story tradition. It culminates in a terrible battle on the field of Kurukshetra, near Delhi, in which the Pandav brothers, led by Yudhishtir, win the kingdom back from their cousins. Bhisham, the uncle of both sets of cousins, dies on the battlefield, pierced by so many arrows that they form a bed for him. While lying mortally wounded on this bed, he gives the Pandavs many final words of advice.

majlis: A gathering in which Shiite Muslims remember and mourn the death of HUSAIN and the events at Karbala. The person who delivers the elegaic oration at such a majlis is called a “zakir.”

Majnun: The most famous lover of Perso-Arabic story tradition. He went mad when his beloved LAILA was married to another; from then on he wandered in the wilderness, singing to Laila and undergoing torments in the name of love. He thus earned the epithet “Majnun,” or “Madman.”

Mall Road: The “Main Street” of the Westernized part of Lahore.

Maulana: A respectful term for a man of religious learning. It is applied to Abba Jan by his friends.

Maulana Muhammad Ali: Maulana Muhammad Ali (1878–1931) was one of the most important leaders of the Khilafat Movement (1919–1924), which sought to shore up international Muslim unity by restoring the power of the Caliphate. At one point Muhammad Ali supported Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia in his fundamentalist program of demolishing the shrines and tombs of some of the Prophet’s companions, on the grounds that these had become overly important in popular Islam.

Maulvi: Similar to MAULANA.

Meerut: A city northeast of Delhi, in modern Uttar Pradesh.

Memsahib: A title compounded of “Ma’am” and “SAHIB,” used for English ladies.

Mir: Mir Taqi Mir (c. 1722–1810) was one of the two greatest poets of the classical Urdu ghazal tradition; Ghalib was the other.

Moradabad: A city east-northeast of Delhi, in modern Uttar Pradesh.

Mount Qaf: In Islamic story tradition, the mountain that surrounds the edge of the world; it is inhabited by jinns and other nonhuman species.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah: Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948) was the chief architect, and first Governor General, of the new state of Pakistan.

Muharram: The first month of the Islamic calendar, during which Muslims observe ten days of mourning, culminating in the Tenth Day which for Shiites includes special MAJLIS gatherings, and processions that carry tall standards bearing religious emblems.

Munir Niyazi: A well-known modern Pakistani poet (1923–2006) who lived in Lahore.

Munshi: A polite term for an educated, respectable person.

Najaf: The city in Iraq where ALI lies buried; it is much venerated for that reason.

Nandi the Bull: In Hindu tradition, Nandi is the mount on whom the great ascetic god Shiva rides.

Narbada: A river that flows through the southwestern part of Madhya Pradesh into Gujarat.

Navab Hazrat Mahal: The wife of the Navab of Avadh who was deposed by the British in 1856. She participated in the rebellion of 1857.

Nazir: Vali Muhammad Nazir Akbarabadi (1735–1830) was a popular Urdu poet, known for his use of Indic and Hindu themes along with Perso-Arabic and Muslim ones.

Om, shanti, shanti, shanti: “Om” is a sound that expresses the vibration of the cosmos, and “shanti” means “peace.” In Hindu tradition phrases like this can be repeated over and over to induce a meditative state.

Pakizah: A romantic, melodramatic, extremely popular film (1971); its heroine, Pakizah (“Pure”), played by the famous actress Meena Kumari, was the illegitimate daughter of a dancing-girl and an upper-class landowner.

pan: A widely popular blend of betel nut, spices, and sometimes tobacco, wrapped in a leaf; it is held in the mouth and slowly chewed, producing a red, flavorful juice.

Partition: The 1947 division of British-controlled India into the two new states of India and Pakistan.

pipal: This tree, considered sacred by many Hindus, is often associated with temples and shrines.

Prince Firoz Shah: A grandson of BAHADUR SHAH’s, who continued to fight a guerrilla war against the British even after the rebellion of 1857 had been crushed; he finally left India, and died in Mecca in 1877.

Rabia of Basra: A famous eighth-century female Iraqi saint and mystic.

Rahul: The Buddha’s son, who in folk tradition became a monk.

Raisina: A small village set on a hill, which eventually became part of New Delhi.

Ram: See RAMCHANDAR-JI.

Ram nam satya hai: “The name of Ram is truth,” a phrase often chanted by Hindus as they bear a corpse to the burning-ground.

Ramayan: See RAMCHANDAR-JI.

Ramchandar-ji: The hero of a great Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayan*, and of countless traditional Hindu stories. Although he was an incarnation of the great god Vishnu, he was known for his humility and respectful behavior, including kind treatment of his loyal monkey allies and other animal helpers during his years of exile in the forest. His animal army helped him find and recover his kidnapped wife, Sita. When the squirrel, trying to be helpful, was laughed at by the monkeys for its smallness, Ramchandar-ji said words of comfort and ran his fingers down the squirrel's back.

Rashid ul-Khairi: Rashid ul-Khairi (1868–1936) was an extremely popular writer of melodramatic domestic novels about female characters.

Ravan: The hundred-headed demon king who was killed by RAMCHANDAR-JI.

Ravi: The river that flows through Lahore.

Red Fort: The famous fort and palace in Delhi, built by Shah Jahan (r. 1627–1658), from which BAHADUR SHAH ruled until he was deposed in 1857.

Rupnagar: The (imaginary) town in which Zakir is born and spends his childhood. It is located somewhere in northwestern Uttar Pradesh; the nearest large city seems to be Bulandshahr. "Rup" means "beauty, form, shape," and "nagar" means "city."

rutting: An adjective describing the wild and violent behavior of male elephants in the mating season.

Sabbo: Diminutive for "Sabirah." The name "Sabirah" means "patient, enduring."

Sadhora: A small town near Ambala whose residents are considered to be stupid. The town of Kursi, near Lucknow, has a similar reputation.

Sahib: A polite form of address for a social equal or superior.

Savitri: A wife famous in Hindu story tradition for her absolute devotion to her husband Satyavan.

scooter-taxi: A three-wheeled vehicle like a motorcycle in front, with a second, canopied seat between its rear wheels that is wide enough to hold two passengers.

Shah namah: The Persian national epic, by Firdausi (c. 940–c. 1020).

Shaikh: A title generally given to descendants of the Prophet's companions; descendants of the Prophet himself are called "Sayyids."

Shamnagar: A neighborhood in Lahore; "Sham" is derived from a name for KRISHAN.

Sharar: Abdul Halim Sharar (1860–1926) was a well-known novelist and journalist.

Shariat: The received body of Muslim faith and tradition.

Shesh: In Hindu mythology, the immense cosmic serpent.

Sialkot: A city in Pakistan, north of Amritsar.

Sikandar Mirza: An army general who was elected President of Pakistan in 1956, then deposed and exiled by Ayub Khan in 1958.

Silk Handkerchief Band: A group of Muslim fundamentalist revolutionaries who took refuge in Afghanistan and communicated with their allies in British India by means of smuggled messages written on pieces of silk. When one such message was discovered, the plot (1915–1916) was foiled.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan: Sir Sayyid (1817–1898) was a controversial and extremely influential modernizer and social reformer, founder of the famous Aligarh Muslim University.

’65: In 1965, there was an indecisive seventeen-day war between India and Pakistan.

Solomon: In Islamic story tradition, God has given Solomon power over all the animals, and especially over the birds. In Quran 27:22–28, a bird carries a letter from Solomon to the Queen of Sheba.

Specials: Special trains transporting refugees between India and Pakistan at the time of Partition in 1947.

standard: See MUHARRAM.

Sultanah the Brigand: A famous Uttar Pradesh highwayman of the 1920s, whose exploits and elusiveness made him a folk hero. In folk tradition, a British police officer named Young was his chief pursuer.

Tantiya Topi: One of the most formidable rebel commanders of 1857. Even after the rebellion was all but crushed, he continued to fight a guerilla war in the area around Jhansi until he was betrayed to the British in 1859. The British hanged him; he faced death with great firmness.

Tenth Day: See MUHARRAM.

Umayyids: See KARBALA.

U.P: Then the “United Provinces,” now Uttar Pradesh, a large Indian state encompassing most of the Gangetic plain.

Vaid: A title for a practitioner of the traditional Hindu system of ayurvedic medicine.

Verse of the Throne: Quran 2:255, a glorification of God.

Vyaspur: The (imaginary) larger town where Zakir and his family settle after they leave Rupnagar. “Vyas,” meaning “Arranger,” is the legendary author of the *MAHABHARAT*; “pur” means “town.” It seems to be somewhere between Delhi and Moradabad.

Wagah: The border-crossing point between Lahore and Amritsar.

Walton Camp: One of the camps set up in Lahore in 1947 to house refugees arriving from across the newly-drawn border with India.

yar: A rough, comradely, affectionate term of address used among male peers. Its general sense is something like “pal.”

Zafar: See BAHADUR SHAH.

Zakir: The central figure of the novel, who is sometimes the narrator as well. His name means “rememberer” or “teller.” See Majlis.

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